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Connie Staccato
Cooks Mafia Favorites

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By Connie Staccato

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Nostalgia will never be the same.

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About Connie Staccato

Mangiamo

Ciao

Mystery Sandwich

Ciao a tutti , my name is Connie Staccato, and I'm a displaced Sicilian American housewife living in a suburb of Chicago. I say "displaced" because, in my opinion, the only time a Sicilian American should live in a suburb is when they're in the witness protection program.

I come from food people. My father-in-law owned a pretty well-known Italian restaurant. My brother-in-law was a restaurant manager. My Sicilian grandmother was a superb cook and could feed fifty people—well—without breaking a sweat. My aunts were wonderful bakers. My son Nino once became totally obsessed with *Food Network Star* and, though he was a little disturbed by what they were doing with the *Chicken Vesuvio* , he was inspired. His culinary creations are epic. My daughter Nicki can make sauce with the best of them. If you're not married and you're reading this, she's still single. Call me.

My husband Anthony is a good cook too. But he prefers just to eat. And offer suggestions.

I want this collection of stories, advice, and recipes to be a legacy for my children. I also want to share the precious secrets of the Sicilian and Italian kitchens I have known before those secrets are lost to history. However, right now I'm not quite in the mood to be sharing much of anything, because right now I am *really mad* at my *gabadost* husband for "forgetting" to hire a snow-removal service this winter. So I had to go and shovel the snow, because he's over eighty years old, and I'll thank you very much not to ask me what I was thinking.

(He's Italian, *not* Sicilian. And my grandmother warned me.)

But while I'm waiting for the blisters on my hands to heal, I'll try to simmer down long enough to share a recipe for something simple, a sandwich. A real sandwich. A sandwich not involving peanut butter. And pretend like I'm telling you this while we're hanging out in my ridiculously small suburban kitchen. Where the dishwasher has never worked. Not once.

My daughter refers to my recipes as passive-aggressive. (You want passive-aggressive? *I'll* give you passive-aggressive. Your father. *That's* passive-aggressive.) Nicki thinks I should be more precise.

Nicki, Mom here. The whole point is you don't *need* to be precise. Most of this is Italian food. It's an oral tradition. With Italian food, if you even come *close*, it's gonna taste good. I promise. Keep in mind, though, that this line of thinking only applies to cooking, *not* baking. Baking is chemistry you eat, and there are rules.

I'll get precise when I need to. Trust me.

On the other hand, my cousin Vita says that my recipes are like listening to bedtime stories. She finds them soothing. Personally, I think if you're looking for precision, you can go google something. You want love in your food? That's what I'm gonna give you. It tastes better.

Anthony calls this sandwich a *montalbano* because it's a sandwich I read about in an Inspector Montalbano mystery. There's a whole series of Inspector Montalbano mysteries, which I highly recommend. He's a Sicilian policeman (*not* on the take) who has a food obsession. So I feel like I know him.

Montalbanos

Bread

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

Pecorino cheese, sliced or grated

Drizzle two slices of bread with olive oil, and sprinkle them with a little salt and pepper. Inspector Montalbano used whole wheat Sicilian bread (yes, it's a thing), but use whatever you like. Put some Pecorino cheese, or some grated Pecorino-Romano, between the slices. That's it. Delicious. Easy. Teresa Giudice could have made it in prison, for God's sake. Have a glass of wine with your montalbano. You can make it open-faced, too, and/or toast it in the oven, which is what we do when we're having soup because then it's like a giant crouton.

And one more thing. If you're inclined to be offended by the title of this book, let me assure you that I really *am* Sicilian. I've really *have* known some Mafiosi. And some of these recipes really *are* their favorite foods.

I got creds.

One Woman's Opinion

The other day, I was cruising the internet looking for something to buy, preferably a handbag. Not that I *need* a handbag—I don't—but I find that revenge shopping has a beneficial effect on my blood pressure. "Revenge shopping," in the Connie Staccato Dictionary of Real Life, is defined as "the purchase of an expensive but unnecessary object, brought about by one's husband making one crazy." Anthony is very lucky in that most of my revenge shopping involves wearable items. I have heard of other revenge shoppers buying things like satellite dishes, cars, houses, horses, and/or face-lifts. And I say, good for them.

Anyway, while I was shopping, I ran across the following article: "15 Easy One-Pot Recipes for Date Night."

And I thought, "Seriously? Date night for *who*?" I don't know what I found more offensive, the "Date Night" or the "One Pot."

Yeah, I know, we've all been there, making dinner for our sweeties. And it was probably fun. And romantic. Done right, it's a spectacular display of our domestic divinity, designed to make the man our slave. Forget the fifty-shades-of-whatever bullshit. What man has any hope of resisting a woman who can make manicotti while wearing high heels?

To be fair, my friend Babs does the at-home-dinner-date thing all the time with her husband. *However*—and this is important—even though they're at home, they dress up (*she* does; he just doesn't take off his tie after work), open a bottle of wine, and create some actual *cuisine*, which Babs is quite good at, in spite of the fact that her paternal ancestors came from north of the Arctic Circle. But "Easy One-Pot" doesn't sound like cuisine to me. It sounds like an excuse not to go out.

And *that* needs to be nipped in the bud. Because, all too easily, it goes from Easy One-Pot Date Night to "Hey, Connie, bring me a beer. What's for dinner?"

Maybe the article was written for guys—that would sort of make sense—or *by* a guy. I couldn't tell. It seemed pretty gender-neutral. For the record, let me say that—in my own experience—there is very little about gender that's neutral. And the next *gagootz* I hear saying, "We're pregnant," is gonna get the back of my hand.

We are not pregnant; *we* are going to be parents—*she's* pregnant. If

you don't want to take my word for it, just wait until you're watching her writhing in agony, cursing your existence. I promise, she will never really forgive you unless you take her to lots of nice places and give her jewelry. The good stuff. Then maybe.

I recommend you start now for insurance.

The Stuff of Dreams

Marinara Sauce

Let's learn how to cook.

How to cook:

1. Read the recipe.
2. Buy the ingredients.
3. Do what the recipe tells you to do.
4. End of story.

Anybody who tells you it's more complicated than that is lying.

(**Author's note** : If you're Italian, most of my recipes will feed the *famiglia* . If you're not Italian or don't have a famiglia, then you'll have food for a week. You can freeze it, if you want. Italian food does well in the freezer.)

Now, let's learn how to cook something good. Marinara sauce.

Marinara sauce is the secret of life. It is the measure of an Italian woman's worth. Sauce is as individual to an Italian family as a tartan is to a Scottish clan. A grown man, if he is Italian, will get tears in his eyes when he talks about his mother's sauce. My daughter Nicki says you need to marry "up" in sauce. My husband married me anyway but clearly expected improvement.

One day, my father-in-law, the famous restaurateur, gave me a little pamphlet called "The Italian Cookbook."* Just a subtle hint, you know. Enough to make me feel like a total loser in the *cucina* department.

This cookbook includes a recipe for the best (and easiest) marinara sauce in the world, which I have adapted for practical purposes (i.e., I'm lazy), and which I have made at least once a week for the past 200 years. This sauce is so fast and easy that you can make it while you're waiting for the pasta water to boil.

Marinara Sauce

Garlic

Olive oil

Italian plum tomatoes (2 28-oz. or 32-oz. cans)

Salt, oregano, parsley, black pepper

1. Peel some garlic and slice it real thin. (“Mom! How much is some?”...“How much do you like garlic, Nicki?”) 4 to 6 cloves. If you like garlic.
2. Heat up $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of olive oil in a pot over medium-low. The trick to heating olive oil is to heat it until you can smell it. Then the oil is hot enough. When the oil is ready, throw in the garlic. Cook the garlic until it’s light brown (which happens *fast*, so watch), and then turn off the heat, or the oil will spritz all over the place when you put in the tomatoes.
3. Take 2 big cans of Italian plum tomatoes. For the love of God, don’t use crushed tomatoes. That’s the stuff they scrape off the tables at the factory (so said my father-in-law). Put the tomatoes—one can at a time—in a blender, just for a second. Just until the tomatoes bust up. If you don’t have a blender—or if you want to be really Italian about it—put the tomatoes in a bowl and bust them up with your (nice, clean) hands (take your rings off first, especially pearls). Then pour the tomatoes into the oil-and-garlic mixture, and turn the burner back on to medium-low.
4. Add $2\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. of salt, 2 tsp. of oregano, 1 tsp. of chopped parsley, and $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. of black pepper. The parsley and pepper should be fresh, but it’s not a big deal if they aren’t. Simmer rapidly for about 20 minutes. And stir it once in a while.

That’s it. People have told me that they cook their marinara sauce all day. They’re stupid. Now go to confession and beg God’s forgiveness that you ever opened a bottle of Prego.

Serve the sauce over pasta. Or risotto. Or polenta. Or meatloaf. Or anything. With some grated parmesan, some good bread, and a salad. Or add chicken broth and call it soup. Crack an egg or two into it while it’s simmering (magical). Add beans. Or spinach. Whatever. This sauce will be your reputation long after people forget that one time you were caught smoking weed with the band at your sister’s wedding.

And I am not lying when I tell you that Stefanie Policastro’s boyfriend was down on bended knee, with the ring, not *one week* after Stefanie finally learned how to make marinara sauce. They’d

been playing house for four years. *Four years*. Are you kidding? So, believe me, this is wonderful, powerful stuff.

Use it wisely.

* Culinary Arts Institute, Chicago, 1956. Out of print. I hope I owe them royalties someday.

A Thousand Words

Linguine with Clam Sauce

A while back, I saw this picture on the internet. It was a picture of Helena Bonham Carter. Naked. With a tuna. A tuna that wasn't in a can.

I didn't click on the picture to find out what was going on because I was having so much *more* fun speculating on what possible reasons an apparently intelligent adult woman with a lot of goddamn money would have for doing this.

Let's start with the tuna. Why a tuna? Why not a squid? Was it alive? It didn't appear to be thrashing, though it must have been recently caught because it looked pretty healthy. But why would somebody want to get naked and snuggle a dead tuna?

Which brings up the next point. Helena, honey, what's with the naked? I know you had just broken up with your whack-job boyfriend, and maybe you were trying to beat him to the punch with some revenge porn because naked-with-a-tuna would be right up his alley, *capeesh* ? And I'm sure you'd rather have it done tastefully. But still, sweetheart, you're forty-eight years old, and... seriously? I mean, I know fifty is the new thirty and all that, but not really. Ask your children. If they won't tell you, you can borrow mine. My daughter got hives the one time I was thinking about getting a nose ring.

Maybe it was a live tuna. Maybe they gave it some tuna Xanax to cool it out long enough for the shot. Maybe Helena was just putting a message out there: "Hey! Fish are people, too. Don't eat them. Look how much I love this one!"

Whatever. It was a great picture.

And it has inspired me to give you a fish recipe. For Fridays and Lent.

Linguine with White Clam Sauce

Sounds gourmet, right? Don't be scared. This one's even easier than the marinara sauce.

Olive oil

Garlic

Anchovies (optional)

Minced clams (3 6.5-oz. cans, at least)

Parsley, salt, pepper

1. Heat up 6 Tbsp. of olive oil in a big, deep skillet over medium-low. Chop a bunch of garlic (4 to 6 cloves) and cook it in the oil until light brown.
2. Throw in a couple of anchovies. Just to “give the sauce a goose,” and that’s a direct quote from my father-in-law. Stir until the anchovies disintegrate. (If you don’t have anchovies, don’t worry about it.)
3. Add 3 or 4 cans of minced clams, juice and all. Turn off the heat first, or it will spritz. Bring to a boil, turn down the heat to a simmer, and cook until the clams are sort of pink.
4. Add ¼ cup of chopped parsley (fresh is best, but don’t stress out), and salt and pepper (don’t skimp).
5. Ladle over linguine.

Serve with a salad, crusty bread, cheese, and wine. White wine would be the thing, but I drink red wine with everything because I found out it makes you skinny (still waiting). Have some lemon ice or *sorbetto* for dessert. You’re serving fish with garlic, so you need a little something to counteract that after the fact.

Word of advice: If you’re feeding Americans, don’t mention the anchovies. Americans are afraid of anchovies—the same way they’re afraid of beets.

Trust me, they’ll never know.

Let the Good Times Roll

Jambalaya

In spite of my Sicilian heritage, I've never been much of a Catholic.

Actually, that's not true. Until about fifth grade, I was all *kinds* of Catholic. I was baptized, made my Holy Communion dressed as a chubby little bride of Christ, chose a confirmation name (Maria Goretti, the quintessential Italian saint—look it up), and solemnly pledged my everlasting allegiance—and a percentage of any future money I might have—to the Catholic Church. The nuns in my Catholic school had all the girls convinced that the convent should be our primary goal and destination (and that we were good at English, not math). The weak-willed—defined as “those who might possibly consider having sex someday”—had other options: secretary, teacher, or nurse. The truly useless could just settle on being a wife and mother, but only if we promised never to use birth control, produce at least six little souls for The Church, and send them all to Catholic schools. Of course, I wanted to be a nun. I figured it would make everybody happy, and I could stop worrying about burning in hell.

Then, in a flash, it was over.

I was about ten years old, and I was reading one of my grandfather's *National Geographic* magazines. And I saw a picture of a lady in a pink-and-black-striped bathing suit. And that bathing suit was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Suddenly, I no longer wanted to be a nun. Nuns didn't wear bathing suits. Ever.

For a while, I considered substituting missionary for nun as my career choice, since I imagined that missionaries *could* wear bathing suits, especially if they were in some place like Hawaii. I have no idea why I thought Hawaii needed missionaries in the latter half of the twentieth century (or ever, as I'm sure most Hawaiians would agree), but I was determined to somehow fit that bathing suit into a solemnly confirmed Catholic lifestyle.

I eventually decided, “Fuck it,” and the whole Catholic thing went right out the window, never to return. Saved by fashion. I've been looking for that bathing suit ever since with no luck. But it served its purpose. I was cured.

However, there's one thing I've *always* liked about Catholicism,

and that's Lent (except for the whole depressing dust-thou-art-ashes-on-the-forehead thing). Lent begins in February, and the best part is it has food restrictions. No meat, for starters, and real Catholics usually give up sweets. Lent comes right at the end of all the fattening holidays, so if you do it right, you're forced to eat sensibly for forty days, and you're back to normal just in time for the Easter Bunny. Lent is brilliant.

Here's a recipe for Mardi Gras, your last chance to eat meat before Lent: jambalaya. Some of my Sicilian antecedents came to Chicago via Louisiana. Some stayed there. I wish I could tell you that I got this recipe from them. I didn't. But I once saw somebody from Louisiana make it on TV.

Jambalaya

Olive oil

Butter

Green peppers

Celery

Onion

Garlic

Italian plum tomatoes (2 28-ounce cans)

Smoked sausage

Turkey (the frozen leftovers from Thanksgiving, if you have any)

Rice

Cajun spice (black, white, and red pepper, salt, garlic powder)

Scallions

1. First, make a batch of Cajun spice. Mix together 1 tsp. each of the peppers and salt and 2 tsp. of the garlic powder. You'll need 2 tsp. of spice for the recipe, and you can store the rest in a jar. If you don't feel like making it yourself, you can usually find a Cajun spice mix at the grocery store.
2. Chop up 2 green peppers, 1 big onion, 2 stalks of celery, and lots of garlic. Make sure you take the seeds and veins out of the green peppers.
3. In a big pot, heat up about ½ cup of olive oil and a big pat of butter. Cook the vegetables until they're soft.
4. Add 2 cans of Italian tomatoes. Bring it all to a boil, turn down the heat, and let it simmer.
5. Cut up some (and this is important) *smoked* sausage into

small pieces and add it to the pot.

6. You can also add some cooked chicken and/or shrimp. Whatever you like or have in the fridge. I use the last of the leftover turkey that's been sitting in my freezer since Thanksgiving. The timing is perfect because Mardi Gras is about three months after Thanksgiving, and you're taking your chances with frozen food after that.
7. Simmer all together for another while. ("Mom, how long is a while?"..."About an hour, Nicki.") The tomatoes will get soft. Smash them against the side of the pot with a wooden spoon.
8. Now, add 2 cups of water and 1½ cups of uncooked rice. Stir. Bring to a boil again, turn the heat down to low, cover the pot, and cook for about 30 minutes or more, until the rice is done.
9. Stir in 2 tsp. of the Cajun spice. Add salt, if you want.

Serve the jambalaya with chopped scallions, tabasco sauce, red wine, and French bread. Get a king cake from a bakery. Have a party. Eat lots. And *laissez les bon temps rouler*.

It's your last hurrah until Easter.

Nice

I had a hell of a day yesterday.

Let me just say that the older I get, the more I hate doctors.

I mean, I remember hating them when I was a kid because they gave me shots, and now I know I was right. When I got just a little older, though, I was lulled into a false sense of security because:

- I was young and healthy.
- Everything was fine.
- And doctors were those nice people that showed up in the birthing room at the last minute, shook your hand, and took the baby out. Which made me feel *really good* in comparison to the previous twelve hours. (Nurses are mean girls. Someday I'll tell you my labor-and-delivery stories.)

Suddenly, I turned fifty, and all hell broke loose. From that point on, I was an unholy mess.

Who knew? The doctors, that's who.

The *young* doctors are the worst. The *old* doctors take your pressure, look in your ears, ask you how you're doing, and maybe order a little blood test. If you say "Okay," and the blood test agrees, the old doctors tell you everything looks fine, you should stop smoking, and that they'll see you next year. The young doctors, on the other hand, treat your body like week-old *scungilli*. Like they're never going to look like that.

And why won't they ever look like that? Because they're *doctors*, that's why, and the laws of physics don't apply to them, right? They poke and prod and jiggle everything you've got that jiggles. All with a frown and a *foonge*. Then they hand you a mile-long list of tests, the results of which will show a "pre-" condition of something or another, which they're going to "watch." Thank you, Doctor Whoozit. You can now add stress and depression to my list of complaints.

Yesterday, I went to an oral surgeon. My regular dentist had gone from "Gee, it would have been nice if you'd had your wisdom teeth out while you were young," to "These have to come out immediately!" Well, *scoozi*, Dr. Dentist, if my life isn't happening exactly on your schedule.

Anyway, two weeks ago I finally got around to going to a periodontist who also assured me that my head was in imminent danger of exploding and sent me to the oral surgeon, who agreed. Mind you, nothing is bothering me. I have to take their word for it. And my surgery (all four wisdom teeth) is scheduled for next Monday, in case you want to light a candle.

So what I really want to think about right now is chicken wings, mainly because they're not wisdom teeth.

About a month ago, my cousin Vita, who never comes to my house empty-handed, showed up with a bucket of chicken wings from the Jewel. She's a very good woman.

Previously, the only times I'd ever eaten chicken wings in quantity was when they were part of a deluxe combo appetizer at one of those restaurants where all the entrees have cheese and all of the desserts are chocolate, except for the apple one. My kids tell me that Koreans do nice things with chicken wings, which I have yet to experience. The point is that it never would have occurred to me in a thousand years to buy a whole bucket of chicken wings from the Jewel.

They were tasty, though, and I appreciated the gift, but my husband Anthony, not so much. There is a silent consensus in this house that, outside of ice cream and the occasional pizza, we don't do prefab food. He bitched and moaned every time he opened the fridge, and we had to eat the chicken wings every night until they were gone just to get them out of his sight. Which was fine. For me they were a rare treat. For him they were an *infamia*. He told me to tell Vita, "No more chicken wings from the Jewel."

My cousin has the good sense not to take my husband seriously (I should have such good sense). A few days later, Vita and I were in Walgreens, and she saw the Walgreens house brand (called "Nice!") frozen chicken wings on sale. We're talking about something that a large guy who flunked high school English and wears shorts in the winter would pick up to go with his chips and beer.

"Let's get some for Anthony!"

I tried to talk her out of it. "It's a *joke*," she said. So we bought the Nice! frozen chicken wings and gave them to Anthony, who put them in the freezer with a foonge worse than any doctor's. But wasting food is an even bigger *infamia* than buying it frozen or ready-made-from-the-Jewel, so there they stayed.

Until last night, when I was too depressed to cook. Anthony and I

had the Nice! chicken wings for dinner. And guess what? He loved them.

Go figure. I know for a fact he passed English.

A Ray of Sunshine

Veal Piccata

It was a dark day. Mr. Spock had departed our world on his final voyage.

This was really traumatic for me. Back in the 1960s, I was a Spock girl. True, Kirk was hot. But you'd always wonder where he was boldly going when you weren't around, if you get my drift. Even when I was twelve, I knew I didn't need *that* kind of grief.

Spock was The Man. He was a challenge. You wanted to break through that cold, logical exterior to find out what was simmering underneath. (Spoiler alert: What's simmering underneath is just more cold logic. Men aren't nearly as complicated as most women think. Or hope.)

It's a fun fantasy, though, as long as it centers on a fictional character. I'm going through the same thing right now with Benedict Cumberbatch. However, make no mistake about it, it's Sherlock Holmes I want, *not* Benedict Cumberbatch, who can stay home with his knocked-up wife and drive *her* crazy.

At my age, I have no illusions.

Anyway, I needed a ray of sunshine to console me. And where could I find one in the middle of a Chicago winter? In the kitchen. It's called a lemon.

I always have lemons in the house, so when my husband suddenly—and for no apparent reason, since he doesn't give a goddamn about *Star Trek*—decided he wanted veal piccata for dinner, all we had to do was go and buy the meat. Now, Anthony has always maintained that he doesn't like veal, so I was a little surprised. Or maybe I wasn't surprised because I have always suspected that Anthony's body is host to a series of alien beings, none of whom have ever been to planet Earth before. Here's an example of what I mean: He was reading the newspaper one day, and he said to me, "Wow! Prince William got married!" (Actually, he said "Prince Andrew," but I had enough data to solve the equation.) This, from a man who spends four hours every day reading every word in the newspaper and who somehow missed all mention of a royal wedding. It would make sense only if there was a new alien visiting.

We went and got the veal, cutlets or scaloppine or whatever your grocery store calls them. Mine calls them scaloppine, to make it

sound like it's okay that you're spending twenty dollars for a half pound of meat. The important thing is to get the thin pieces that come three or four to a pack. Like little sandwich steaks, only veal. I cut them in half, so they're medallion size, and they're easier to handle.

I created this recipe myself, because the ones I was finding in the cookbooks were too complicated. But I got the basics and a little advice from Anthony's brother Stefano, the restaurant manager. And it truly is sunshine on a plate.

Veal Piccata

Flour

Salt and pepper

Olive oil

Veal medallions

Butter

White wine

Lemon, 1 large

Capers (optional, but recommended)

Parsley

1. Get a big dish (or a pie pan) and put 1 cup of flour in it. Stir in some salt and pepper.
2. Put about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of olive oil in a large, deep skillet, and heat it up over medium heat.
3. Now, take your veal medallions, dredge them in the flour, and fry them in the oil, three at a time. Add more oil if you need to.
4. When the medallions are golden brown on both sides (this happens pretty fast, so be careful), take them out of the pan and put them to the side on a plate.
5. When all the veal is fried, turn the heat off and put 3 Tbsp. of butter into the oil left in the skillet. Add 1 cup of white wine and the juice of a big lemon.
6. Heat and stir and scrape up all the veal-and-flour bits. In 1-2 minutes, this stuff will start to get a little thick. Add some salt and pepper. If you want to get fancy, buy a bottle of capers and put some of those in the sauce, too. They taste good.
7. Put the veal back in the skillet to warm it up again and

sprinkle some parsley on top.

Eccolo ! Veal piccata. Serve with buttered noodles, roasted potatoes, or rice. And a salad and some bread.

Anthony loved the veal, but then he remembered that he feels bad about eating baby animals. I agree. So you can do the same thing with chicken or turkey cutlets because they're too dumb to live.

I feel much better. And you should live long and prosper.

Freedom Fries

French Fries

It was the day before I was getting all four of my wisdom teeth yanked out of my skull.

Fortunately, I had arranged to be (chemically) on another planet during the procedure, but I was dreading what was going to follow. After scouring the internet and polling those among my family and acquaintances who had suffered through this before, I came to the conclusion that there was a wide range of postoperative possibilities, from “Let’s go roller skating!” to “I wish I was dead. But just this week.”

My thoughtful husband decided that it would be a good idea if I cooked something soft and easy to eat to provide me (him) with nourishment for the following week. And beyond, if things didn’t go so well. So, we (he) decided on pasta *fazool*, which I cooked that afternoon. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t feel like digging my own grave.

But pasta *fazool* was NOT the meal I chose to eat on my final day with molars. No, I wanted to put those babies to work one last time. The meal I chose was an enormous steak with some crunchy steamed broccoli and my favorite crispy French fries baked in the oven.

The recipe for pasta *fazool*, I’ll give you later. Right now, I’m all about the French fries. Or “Freedom fries,” as some raging nut bar of an American politician once renamed them, to prove what a great patriot he was. I can’t remember the exact circumstances or the name of the politician, but I do remember that he (it had to be a he because women are usually not that goofy) decided that the French had dissed us in some way, and he wanted to replace “French” with “Freedom” in all the American phrases that had the word “French” in them. So, French bread became Freedom bread, French toast became Freedom toast, French dressing became Freedom dressing, a French kiss became a Freedom kiss, and so on.

And French fries became Freedom fries. How’s that for clever? What a *jidrool*. But now I say “Freedom fries” because I get a good laugh out of it, and when you cook them in the oven, they’re not fattening. So, you’re free from having a fat ass. Here’s how you make them:

Freedom Fries

Baking potatoes

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

1. Get some big baking potatoes. One potato serves 2 people, but just barely, so however many you need.
2. Scrub them or peel them. I scrub.
3. Take your potatoes and slice them up into shapes that sort of look like fries.
4. Put the cut-up potatoes onto a large baking pan. I line my pan with foil and spray some nonstick stuff on the foil because I don't have a dishwasher, other than my husband. The potatoes should lie in the pan in a single layer, so if you're making lots of them, you'll need more than one pan. Whatever works.
5. Drizzle some olive oil over the potatoes. With your hands, rub them with the oil.
6. Sprinkle the potatoes with salt and pepper, and put the pan into a 425°F oven. After about 10 minutes, push them around a little with a spatula so they don't stick. Do that once in a while, and when the potatoes are crispy and turning brown (maybe about a half hour, 45 minutes, watch them), you got Freedom fries.

You can also make these with sweet potatoes if you prefer, in which case I'd peel them first. Either way, eat as many as you want. It's patriotic.

Where Am I?

Chocolate Mousse

I finally had my wisdom teeth removed.

It wasn't nearly as painful as I thought it was going to be and I was in the process of beating myself up for being a big whiny baby, when I fell asleep. And didn't wake up for thirty-six hours.

When I came to, I was in my living room, sitting at my desk. It was 1972, and I was wearing something hideous. Wait, no. Those were just the images I was pulling up on my computer from all the various Fashion Weeks going on around the world. I'm not lying when I say that worse than having my wisdom teeth pulled was waking up and discovering that we're having a 1970s fashion revival.

Please, St. Anthony and the Blessed Virgin, not the '70s. Any other decade but the '70s. Those of us who count ourselves among the survivors will tell you: The '70s were nobody's friend. The '60s were fun, the '80s were silly, the '90s were at least comfortable. But the '70s? There were *earth tones* in the '70s, colors like pumpkin and avocado and harvest gold. And brown. Lots and lots of brown. Everyone wore "fat clothes," and all the white girls had long, straight stringy hair, which they (literally) ironed to make it straighter and stringier. The only way I can explain '70s fashion is I think LSD was still legal back then.

I should have seen the signs: When wedges start creeping back onto the scene, muumuus won't be far behind. And flares (yeah, those look great tucked into your winter boots). And let's not forget fringe. Who doesn't want to look like a hanging planter?

But the real bottom-feeder in all of this was the new "boyfriend" jeans I saw. Sure, if your boyfriend's name is Lil' Loco and he's out on probation. I know fashion needs to keep changing to fund the industry, but...really?

There's an upside, though. As long as it looks like saggy-baggy is here to stay for a while, I have something fattening for you that I found on the internet.

Brain-Dead Easy Chocolate Mousse

Buy a box of instant chocolate pudding mix. Or any flavor—vanilla's good, too, but make sure it's the instant stuff. Put it in a

bowl and add 2 cups of whipping cream. Beat with a whisk for about 2 to 3 minutes, until it's smooth. Chill. Eat. Enjoy. Get fat. Go buy boyfriend jeans.

After the surgery, I was only allowed food that didn't have to be chewed. This stuff fit the bill. True, healthy smoothies would have fit the bill, too, but they're not nearly as much fun as chocolate mousse.

In a world that suddenly looked like an Olsen twin's nightmare, I needed a little comfort food.

My Ice Cream

Ricotta Ice Cream

Sfinci (Sicilian Doughnuts)

This is a special request from my friend Christine in New Jersey.

She calls it “your ice cream,” but someday we’ll do better than that. Maybe it’s somebody’s old family recipe, but I really found it in a magazine at the beauty shop. I suspect that a whole lot of old family recipes come from the backs of cereal boxes.

My Ice Cream

Ricotta cheese, 2½ cups

Sugar, 1 cup

Lemon zest

Kosher salt

Heavy whipping cream, 1 cup

Fresh raspberries

1. Start with 2½ cups of ricotta cheese. Get it from the deli, if you can, because a) it will taste better, and b) the guy at the deli can measure it out for you, so you don’t have to do it again. It’s 1¼ pounds but I’m guessing that a little bit more or less won’t make any difference.
2. Beat the ricotta with 1 cup of sugar, 2 tsp. of lemon zest (that’s the yellow part of the lemon peel, which you scrape off with a cheese grater), and a *big* pinch of kosher salt.
3. When it’s smooth, stir in 1 cup of heavy whipping cream and some fresh raspberries (about one small package; rinse them first). Pour all this into a metal pan and freeze until firm. Sometimes it gets a little too firm, and you have to let it sit out a bit before you can stick a spoon in it.

Christine serves the ice cream in martini glasses. She also breaks up a dark chocolate candy bar and puts pieces of it on top. Christine knows how to party.

You could also stuff it into some cannoli, I suppose. Or into a St. Joseph’s Day *sfinci* . Why not?

Sfinci

Water

Butter
Sugar
Salt
Flour
Eggs

1. In a saucepan on top of the stove, bring 1 cup of water, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of butter, 1 Tbsp. of sugar, and $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. of salt to a boil.
2. Throw in 1 cup of flour all at once and beat with a wooden spoon until you've got a ball. (Trust me, it will happen.) Take it off the stove and beat in 4 eggs, one at a time.
3. Grease a baking sheet and drop heaping tablespoons of dough on it, about 2 inches apart. Bake at 450°F for 15 minutes, and then lower the heat to 350°F and bake another 15 minutes, or until golden brown. You could deep fry the dough instead if you want, but that's messy.
4. Take the sfinci out of the oven. Dust those babies with a little powdered sugar or cinnamon sugar or cocoa powder, and you've got a kick-ass dessert. *Or*, after they cool, you can cut slits in their sides and fill them with whipped cream or jam or pudding or My Ice Cream or whatever you can think up.

(Good Lord, I just had this horrible vision of somebody stuffing a sfinci with egg salad. Or maybe that would actually be brilliant.)

St. Joseph's Day falls on March 19. You don't hear much about St. Joseph in the Bible. He probably worked a lot, drank wine, maybe played dice, and stayed way out of things. Which is why he's so popular with Italians, since that's the way most Italian men are—preferring to leave the drama to the wife and kids. And there's always plenty of drama, especially if you're the foster father of God.

If you really want a cultural experience, look for events called St. Joseph's Day Tables that usually happen in church basements. Go on Google, and see if there's one happening in your vicinity. Don't worry if you're not Italian. Just wear red and give some money for the saint, and nobody will know the difference.

They'll be too busy eating, and so will you.

Stop the Presses!

Fresh Tomato Sauce

This just in (actually, last weekend, but I'm just getting around to it now), from my sister-in-law, Jill:

Fresh Tomato Sauce

Plum tomatoes, fresh

Olive oil

Salt and basil (optional)

1. Preheat your oven to 375°F.
2. With a small, sharp knife, cut the stems out of a bunch of fresh plum tomatoes. Slice them in half lengthwise and put them on a big oiled baking pan, skin side down.
3. Drizzle them with olive oil.
4. Roast the tomatoes in the oven for 40 minutes. Then turn the oven up to 400°F, and roast them for another 20 minutes.
5. Turn the oven off, and leave them in for another 10 minutes.

That's it! Now toss the them with the pasta of your choice, and feast like a Medici. The tomatoes caramelize and sweeten up. Add more oil and some salt, if you want, and/or a little fresh basil. I scooped the seeds out of the tomato halves because I still have four gaping holes where that *boombotz* of an oral surgeon took out my wisdom teeth a few weeks ago. I continue to suffer.

Seriously, at what point were they going to tell me that I wouldn't be able to eat normal food for six months? I would have made myself more mentally ready, like by taking a vow of silence and entering a convent. I can't eat stuff with seeds. I can't eat nuts. I can't eat anything crunchy. Nothing that would get stuck in the holes where my teeth used to be. Well, that covers just about everything, Dr. *Baciagaloop*, what do you eat?

There should be special procedures designed only for Italians. I see this as the future of health care, where you're treated according to your ethnicity. Maybe they'll learn something. There's a reason why the old Italians lived to be ninety-plus, and the only things

they ate were toast and chocolate, washed down with wine and coffee.

Discrimination in health care—my friend Babs just had a brush with that. She's not Italian, but she can cook like a *paisan* .

“So, I go for my check-up the other day. And the doctor is worried about my drinking.”

“Your *drinking* ?” I can think of a few reasons to worry about Babs, but drinking isn't one of them.

“Yeah, I told her how many drinks I usually had a week. I even lowballed it.”

“You told the *truth* ? What did you tell her?”

“Seven to fourteen. I left out my ‘date-night’ cocktails.”

“Seven to fourteen? That's too many? What if you were Italian and had wine with dinner every night?”

You see my point? American doctors, the silly bastards, would have the whole island of Sicily in rehab.

Back to the tomatoes. You could also just eat them as is, as a side dish, or put them on little slices of toasted Italian bread and make bruschetta.

By the way, that word is pronounced broo-SKET.

And here are a few more:

ri-GOAT = *ricotta*

mahr-i-NAHR = *marinara*

You will now be a person of respect in an Italian restaurant.

Frocia

Asparagus and Eggs

I used to hate asparagus. I think it was the texture and color, because I had the same issues with lentils. Asparagus has a weird texture and is not a kid-friendly shade of green, and it wasn't until I was a mature and semi responsible adult that I learned to appreciate the wonders of an asparagus *frocia* (pronounced FRO-dja).

I had a hell of a time figuring out how to spell this word. Many American Sicilian words are only dimly related to proper Italian. The pronunciation has had over a hundred years of isolation to get mangled. I didn't even know the word *frocia* *existed*. And then one day I said "frittata" (Italian, not Sicilian) in front of my cousin Vita (Sicilian, not Italian) and was immediately corrected.

Vita remembers her Aunt Mary Rose's kitchen. I remember my grandmother's kitchen, but there was a difference. Aunt Mary Rose spoke Sicilian in her kitchen. My grandparents spoke Sicilian in their kitchen *only* when:

1. They were on the phone (which was on the wall, and yellow to match the decor) with other Sicilians.
2. They were discussing delicate matters, unsuitable for the ears of the multitude of children in the room. These matters usually involved (I think) unwanted pregnancies, the incarceration of a family member, or an issue related to the guns we kept in a wall behind a dresser up in the attic.*
3. They were using profanity. Sometimes at each other. And then my grandmother would yell, "The windows are open!" which quieted things down a bit because heaven forbid the non-Sicilian neighbors should think we were barbarians. Not that they had the slightest possibility of understanding anything we were yelling about.

Sicilian profanity is not the same as American profanity. American profanity uses specific words, inherited from Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Sicilian profanity uses colorful and obscene references to food, body parts, God, and the Madonna. It's much worse.

At any rate, Vita corrected me, and I found the word on the internet. A frocia is basically a Sicilian omelet. The big difference between an omelet and a frocia is that Sicilians cook the living daylight out of the thing, so they're not fluffy as much as sort of flat and crispy. In my grandparents' house, the frocia came in three varieties: with potatoes, with peppers, or with asparagus.

Since it's springtime and asparagus is in season (\$1.25 a pound at Mariano's last week), I'll give you the recipe for the asparagus frocia. My grandmother called it "the asparagus-and-eggs" because she couldn't think of anything else to call it in English.

Asparagus Frocia

Olive oil

Asparagus

Salt and pepper

Eggs

1. Buy a bundle of fresh asparagus. They should be a little on the thin side, because they'll cook easier than the thick asparagus. Heat your oven to 350°F. Wash the asparagus and break off the ends. My grandmother used to peel it. Lord knows why, so don't. Just scrub it.
2. Take a deep cast iron (this is important!) frying pan and heat up about 4 to 6 Tbsp. of olive oil over medium heat. Dry off the asparagus (or it will splatter all over the place), and fry it. Move it around a lot with a fork until it's a little browned and a little soft. Put some salt and pepper on it.
3. Now, crack 6 eggs evenly over the fried asparagus, break the yolks, and let it all cook over medium-low heat until the bottom is set. Pick up your cast iron pan (if you didn't use cast iron, don't do this!) and put it in the oven until the top of the frocia doesn't wiggle. Maybe 15 to 20 minutes.

Frocia is good hot (for supper), or cold (for lunch or snacks). You can put it on some Italian bread and make a sandwich out of it, too.

And if you want to lose a million zillion pounds, eat a lot of frocia. Why? Because the only fattening ingredient is olive oil, which is magical and will never make you fat.

Trust me.

* Vita's family kept *their* guns behind the ceiling tiles. The brass

knuckles, too.

Chicken Vesuvio à la Possible Mob Connections

Chicken Vesuvio

My cousin Vita once asked me if I'd seen *Mob Wives* .

Where? Like at my house? At a wedding?

The short answer is, "I'm sure." But that wasn't what Vita was referring to. She was referring to the reality TV show. And no, I haven't seen it because that show is not about mob wives. I may be stating the obvious here, but if these women were—in reality—mob wives, they wouldn't be flapping their jaws on TV, am I right? Still, it's a sure moneymaker, since many Americans are fascinated by the Mob.

It's called "The Outfit" in Chicago. Just so you know.

I'm not quite so fascinated. I've had enough reality on that subject to make it a little less than charming, though Vita assures me that the show is hilarious, and she may be right. Any show starring a person named Big Ang might be worth at least one viewing.

Let's talk about Chicken Vesuvio. A true Mafia favorite.

I'll start with some interesting facts.

1. Chicken Vesuvio is, in fact, not Italian, but Italian American.
2. It originated in Chicago in the 1930s, according to Wikipedia.
3. The "Vesuvio" comes from the idea that the dish should be served with the potato wedges formed into the shape of a volcano, though I have never seen it served like this and can't imagine why anyone would bother.
4. There are no peas in Chicken Vesuvio. No, there aren't. Don't start with me.

This recipe comes to me from my father-in-law, who once upon a time owned an Italian restaurant in Chicago, a big hangout for The Outfit. Dad was a colorful person. By colorful, I mean he knew some pretty shady characters. Like, he was the guy who signed Paul Ricca's ("Paulie the Waiter") citizenship papers.

In his youth, Dad worked for Al Capone—the dog races and a little

booze running. One day he went legit by becoming a photographer for a newspaper and was one of the first on the scene of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, after having been tipped off by one of his former coworkers.

Eventually, Dad opened his restaurant, and the Chicken Vesuvio became legendary. I'm going to give you two recipes. This first one was published in *The New York Times*, and I'm printing it here verbatim.

Chicken Vesuvio

2 fryers, about 2½ lb. each, cut up

5 large baking potatoes, peeled and quartered

5 cloves of garlic, minced

¼ cup parsley, finely chopped

¼ cup oregano

1½ cups clear canned chicken broth

1 cup olive oil

Cover the bottom of large roasting pan with about 1 inch of oil and preheat. Fry chicken and potatoes on top of stove for 20 minutes. Place in oven and bake at 375°F for another 20 minutes. Pour off most of oil, add the chicken broth, sprinkle parsley, garlic, oregano, salt and pepper over the chicken and potatoes. Cover and return to oven. Bake at 325°F until tender. Served with chilled white Orvieto wine. Serves 4.



Now, here's a revised version. For real life, not a restaurant. I mean, who's got room on top of their stove to fry two whole cut-up chickens and five potatoes? And what the hell is Orvieto wine?

Connie Staccato's Chicken Vesuvio

Chicken legs and thighs

Baking potatoes, peeled and cut into 8 pieces *lengthwise* (in case you want to build a volcano)

Olive oil

8 cloves of garlic, minced

Salt, pepper, oregano, parsley

(Forget the chicken broth. Let the chicken make its own broth. And "pour off most of oil"? Are you kidding me?)

1. Heat your oven to 375°F.
2. Generously coat the bottom of a large roasting pan with

olive oil. I line my pan with foil first and spray it with some nonstick stuff, a suggestion you will thank me for when you wash the dishes.

3. Put the chicken and potatoes in the pan, and drizzle with more olive oil. Take your *clean, bare* hands and rub the oil all over the chicken and potatoes.
4. Now, go wash your hands *really good* with soap and hot water, or you're gonna get food poisoning.
5. Drizzle with a little more olive oil. Sprinkle all the other ingredients on top, cover the pan with foil, and put it in the oven.
6. After about an hour (check the potatoes to see if they're done), take the foil off the pan and keep baking until everything is lightly browned and slightly crispy, a half hour or so.

This makes fantastic party food, served with a baked mostaccioli, a salad, and some good Italian bread.

And to make it authentic, hire a waiter named Paulie.

Grazie Mille

Valeria's Eggplant

One of the perks of being a blogger is you make friends.

I have a blog. And my profile picture is an image of St. Lucy since I have no desire to advertise my face. If you google my blog, please note that those are human eyeballs Lucy has on her plate (Catholicism can be a real hoot). I'm sorry, but she was the closest thing to a female food saint I could find.

My blogger friends are always very kind. Everybody's like, "Way to go, Connie!" or "Can't wait to try the pasta fazool, Connie!" And they *never* say stuff like, "What a freakin' waste of time, Connie! You suck." And if somebody did, I am mistress of my own online universe, and I could send the *chooch* into internet oblivion with two clicks of the mouse. Now *that* would be a superpower worth having in real life. Think of it:

"I'm sorry, but I think I was here first."

"Oh, were you?" *click* *click* <delete> "My bad!"

I could be called "The Blogger," and I want the cartoonist to draw me to look like Scarlett Johansson on a bender.

So, let me tell you about my friend Valeria. Valeria is a bona fide Italian lady who really lives in Italy. She's young; she's beautiful; she's nice. And she can cook. Valeria, honey, your husband ever leaves you, you come see me. I'll fix you up. You are every American man's dream.

These are Valeria's eggplant recipes, which she sent to me after I mentioned in a blog post that there is no food I would rather eat. She sent me two recipes: the first one is "light" and the second one she describes as "tastier and with more calories."

Do you see why I love her? I've added some translations.

Valeria's Eggplant (Recipe 1)

1. Cut eggplants in slices 1 cm (**a little less than ½ inch**) high. Put the slices onto oven plates (**baking pans**) after covering the plates with anti adhering paper. (**I think this is parchment paper. I would just use foil and oil the pans.**)
2. Sprinkle with salt and pour olive oil over the slices (the

slices must not be one over the other). Sprinkle with grated bread (**bread crumbs**) .

3. Put into preheated oven at 200°C (**That's about 400°F; don't set yourself on fire**) for 20 minutes. The quality of the eggplants and the olive oil is paramount!

Valeria's Eggplant (Recipe 2)

1. Cut eggplants in slices 0.5 cm (**about ¼ inch**) high. If you have the patience, grill them slightly, after pouring some salt on them.
2. Prepare a tomato sauce with tomatoes, onion, fresh basil, olive oil. (**Or use my sauce, see recipe for The Stuff of Dreams.**) Cut mozzarella or *provola dolce* into thin slices.
3. Get ham (*prosciutto cotto*) cut into super-thin slices. (**Any ham will do, as long as it's thin.**)
4. Now, make at least 2 layers of eggplants, ham, tomato sauce, and mozzarella and put into preheated oven for 40 minutes at 200°C (**if you're a slow learner, see note above**) .
5. If you manage to get some parmesan cheese too, sprinkle some between the layers.

By the way, Valeria is a fashion influencer, so go get a gander at her blog (cocoetlavieenrose.com). She offers advice on how not to look like yesterday's news, and she gives *personal* fashion consultations. Like, for *free* . Just because she's a nice lady.

For instance, I went out last weekend. *Out* -out, the kind of out where cocktail attire is recommended. Since I haven't worn high heels since the last time somebody died, I could have left a comment on Valeria's blog saying, "Hey, Valeria! What should a saggy old bat like me wear to an after-five wedding in April, when it should be warm and sunny, but it's really 40°F and rainy because I'm in Chicago?" And she would come up with the perfect outfit.

I *could* have done that, but I didn't because I only have one after-five outfit anyway. Which sort of means I should go shopping. But she *did* help me decide what to pack when I went to Spain last October. And I thank her for persuading me that gym shoes are a thing.

Now, go make eggplant and get your Euro-glam on. It'll make you

happy.

His Favorite Soup

Beef Barley Soup

Whenever I make soup—and it doesn't matter which soup I make—my husband Anthony will come out of the kitchen, glowing, a bowl of soup in hand, and the following hilarity will ensue:

“This is my favorite soup!”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been married to you for thirty-nine years.”

“No, I mean, really. This is *really* my favorite soup.”

“You said that about the soup I made last week.”

At this point, there is a pause, and Anthony will stare at me like he’s trying to remember who I am and blink a few times. I know what he’s doing. He’s checking his data bank. For those of you who are new to this chronicle of my life, I have long suspected that Anthony’s body is inhabited by a series of alien tourists.

“Well, that’s my favorite soup, *too* ,” he will say, thinking he is cleverly covering up his alien origins by posing as a garden-variety human lunatic. “But this soup is *great* .”

It’s nice to be appreciated. Here’s Starman’s latest:

Favorite Beef Barley Soup

Beef shank and/or 1 lb. of beef stew meat

Bay leaves

Olive Oil

Garlic

Onion

Beef bouillon cubes

Italian plum tomatoes, 1 big can

Celery

Sliced fresh mushrooms (fry them first, in olive oil and a pat of butter)

Basil, thyme, parsley

Barley

Carrots

Salt and pepper

Frozen vegetables (optional)

1. Take a beef shank and/or a package of beef stew meat and put it in a big pot. Cover with water.
2. Add a few bay leaves and bring to a boil over medium-high heat, then turn the heat down so it's barely boiling. Skim off any foam.
3. Chop and cook 6 cloves of garlic and a large onion in olive oil. Add to the pot.
4. When the soup comes back to barely boiling, add a couple of cubes of beef bouillon and stir.
5. Cover the pot but leave a little "vent" with the lid so it doesn't boil over. Simmer for a couple of hours over low heat. You should check in on the pot once in a while to make sure it keeps simmering, and add more water if you need to.
6. When the meat is tender, add a large can of Italian tomatoes and some chopped celery.
7. Fry the sliced mushrooms in olive oil and a pat of butter (because mushrooms don't taste like anything unless they're fried in some kind of fat), and add them to the pot.
8. Put in your spices, too. Basil, thyme, and parsley are good. About ½ tsp. each.
9. Keep simmering, with the pot still (mostly) covered.
10. About an hour before you want your soup to be done, take the bone out of the soup (if you used the beef shank). Smash the tomatoes against the side of the pot with a wooden spoon.
11. Add 1 cup of barley, 1½ cups of water, and some cut-up carrots.
12. Simmer until the barley and carrots are tender.
13. Add black pepper. And salt, if you want.
14. At the very end, you can stir in a bag of frozen mixed vegetables. Or peas. Or green beans. Or spinach. But that's optional. I say "optional" because I usually forget.

This is my own recipe that I made up one day, based on what was on the back of the barley box. So take whatever liberties you want. It takes a long time to cook, about five hours total, but you're not doing anything difficult or labor-intensive, and it's almost

impossible to screw up. This is a wonderful soup for winter or for spring days in places like Chicago, when it's still cold outside because the east wind is blowing off that giant fucking ice cube that accumulated in Lake Michigan last winter, and we're shivering in T-shirts because we're idiots.

And it's great anytime an alien drops in.

Life's a Beach

Artichoke Casserole

It took me almost an hour to get dressed this morning.

This always happens the first few days when it gets warm outside. I have no problem with winter clothes. I understand winter clothes. We wear clothes in the winter to keep us warm. Summer clothes confuse me. We don't wear clothes in the summer to keep us warm. We wear clothes in the summer to keep us from getting arrested.

We can't go around naked, which besides being socially unacceptable (except, evidently, at a Met Gala), is a bad idea for feet. And for chairs. So we wear as little as possible because it's hot, and we try to wear clothes that help to obscure the view of our less-than-stellar body parts.

The list of which gets longer every year.

Hence the confusion this morning. This year, my ankles made the list. They don't need to be covered, exactly, but they probably shouldn't be showcased. *That* took me by surprise, since I've always had very nice ankles. Not anymore. It's like beach erosion. Every year, there's a little less beach. And every year, right about this time, I have to reconfigure my whole wardrobe.

If I'm going to go through all this trouble, the results should at least be worth it. Which means that, come the warm weather, I try to shave a few calories off my food allowance. But going all the way to October without a stuffed artichoke? No way. Lucky for me, I don't have to. Lucky for you, today I present my friend Christine's (totally healthy) Artichoke Casserole.

She's not Sicilian, but she's married to one. And lives in New Jersey. Same thing.

Christine's Artichoke Casserole

Frozen artichoke hearts

Olive oil

Chicken broth

Bread crumbs

Grated cheese

Salt, pepper, basil

Butter

1. Cook a big bag of frozen artichokes hearts according to the package directions.
2. Drain them and put them into an oiled casserole dish.
3. Pour more olive oil over them. You could add a little chicken broth, too.
4. Sprinkle with bread crumbs mixed with grated cheese (I use parmesan), salt, pepper, and basil.
5. Drizzle with more olive oil. Top with a pat of butter and put the dish into a 350°F oven until heated through and a little golden brown on top.

If you've ever made stuffed artichokes, you'll notice that this recipe is about a gazillion times easier and much less time-consuming. If you feel guilty about that, you can use fresh artichokes and fresh basil. But I'm a firm believer that recipes should strike a happy balance between easy and tasty. Just saying, the rest of us will be out in the sunshine.

Enjoying what's left of the beach.

Quid Pro Quo

Flank Steak

We had marinated flank steak for dinner last night. The steak, a London broil, was purchased a few days ago—in pre marinated state—from a butcher shop.

Jeez, a good butcher shop is hard to find lately! My old one closed last year (due to lack of kale, I suppose) and, to be honest, the butcher shops in these huge fancy grocery stores just don't do it for me. Call me old-fashioned, but I want my meat from a big, red-faced guy named Ed and not some skinny little *bambino* named Jason, even if he is cute as a button and full of good intentions.

It's like the other day. I go into the Walgreens to buy shampoo, and there's this little blond girl, maybe eighteen years old with the face of a da Vinci, at the register.

"You got it, girlfriend!" she chirped. (Scoozi?) I really didn't know how to respond to that. Then I decided it was charming because she was pretty and making an effort to be nice and fun, and in general, I'm not a crabby old bitch. At least not in public.

Better there should be no witnesses.

The marinated steak was my husband's idea. He goes through these phases once in a while. We've been through this one already, but maybe a new alien had just checked into the Hotel Anthony.

Flank Steak

I marinated the meat overnight in olive oil, wine vinegar, salt, sugar, and garlic. As an experiment, I cut the meat in half and cooked it two ways:

1. Baked in a 350°F oven for 50 minutes. That's what the guy at the butcher shop told me to do. True, he was a skinny little *bambino*. But he looked like his name could've been Ed, so there's potential there.
2. Broiled. (London Broil, capeesh? I figured there was probably a connection.) Four minutes each side, but I think I should've done five.

The result of the experiment was that the baked was more tender and the broiled had a little more flavor. It was a close call. Both

were delicious. Depends on how much time you have and/or if your broiler sets off the smoke detectors in your house.

Like mine. Anthony used to hang a shower curtain over the kitchen doorway every time I broiled something, but he doesn't do that anymore because he never put the nails back up after we got our kitchen painted.

Or sort of painted. I was, unfortunately, out of town while that was going on. Anthony and the painter, in their wisdom, painted over the wallpaper and didn't paint the cabinets, because they decided that the cabinets were in good shape (of course they did). When I pointed out that this was bullshit, Anthony promised to wash them and touch them up. That was four years ago last November.

Very *House Beautiful* , Anthony. This is why nobody with ancestors from north of the Alps would have ever let you marry his daughter. So you got stuck with me, and that's your punishment.

We have leftovers for a week, and now Anthony wants to go back to the butcher's and try the teriyaki-marinated pork tenderloin.

Good idea. So is painting the cabinets.

How to Cook a Vegetable

Vegetables

“I can’t find my glasses.”

“Pray to St. Anthony.”

“I think that’s St. Jude.”

“It’s not St. Jude. St. Jude is for selling your house.”

“That’s St. Joseph. Upside down. Buried in the front lawn.”

“No, it’s St. Jude that’s upside down. You put his holy card upside down and light a candle. He’s upside down because you don’t want him to be comfortable until he gives you what you want.”

“Maybe it’s St. Lucy.”

“That’s eating octopus eyes cooked in milk.”

“*Nobody* eats octopus eyes cooked in milk.”

“*You* do, if you want to find your glasses.”

Straight out, I’m going to tell you I’m not a religious person. I had plenty of that when I was a kid, and it cured me for life. But there’s something about this saint stuff that works. I could tell you stories. And I’m a realist. Why would I walk away from something that works only because it sounds stupid?

The glasses were found, maybe because we were just *talking* about saints. Probably we would’ve found them anyway. (But we’ll never know, will we?) My grandparents’ rituals involving saints were complicated and precise, and I don’t think anybody remembers them exactly anymore. The great revelation is that it doesn’t matter. Any saint will do. Try it. You’ll be amazed.

Which brings me to the subject of vegetables.

My father-in-law once told me that *everything* tastes good if you cook it in olive oil, garlic, and salt. He was exaggerating. But not much.

I remember hating vegetables as a child. My Sicilian grandmother was allergic to garlic (I know, right?), so my mother never cooked with it. And my father, being from Oklahoma, was more than a little suspicious. Ever have canned green beans? Welcome to my childhood.

Thank God, I married into a garlic family. And I’ve never looked back.

The connection between the saints and the Holy Trinity of olive oil, garlic, and salt is simply this: It applies to everything. Here’s the

basic recipe:

Vegetables

Vegetables

Olive oil

Garlic, sliced very thin or chopped up

Salt

1. Wash, peel, and trim (whatever's necessary) your vegetables.
2. Let your vegetables dry.
3. Oil a baking pan, or line it with foil and spray it with nonstick stuff. I line.
4. Spread out your vegetables in the pan. Coat with olive oil, and top with garlic and salt.
5. Put the pan in a 350° oven.
6. Roast the vegetables. However long it takes. It depends on the vegetable. Spinach cooks fast, peppers cook slow. Stir them around occasionally.

You can also fry your vegetables with garlic and salt in olive oil, but I prefer the oven. Less babysitting. And I can make larger quantities. We look *forward* to leftovers in the Staccato house.

How much oil, how much garlic, and how much salt? To taste, my darlings. It's a sure way of finding your soulmate.

This recipe applies to:

- Asparagus
- Artichoke hearts
- Broccoli
- Cauliflower
- Carrots
- Eggplant
- Fennel
- Green beans
- Kale
- Mushrooms
- Onions
- Peppers
- Spinach

- Tomatoes

And there's probably more I'm not even thinking about right now. Once you have the basics, you can add black pepper, bread crumbs, grated cheese, pine nuts, capers, spices, etc. Mix and match the vegetables. You can also crack some eggs over them after they're roasted, and then you'll have a mega-omelet. Use your imagination.

And thank St. Anthony that you found me.

Take the Pledge

Venezuelan Chicken Salad

I've got a new diet for you. Raise your right hand.

"I, (*your name here*), solemnly swear, with Connie Staccato and God as my witnesses, to never *ever* again eat *anything* that isn't absolutely fucking fantastic."

Okay, done. Now you're safe. Unless you're a four-star chef with a lot of time on your hands, you will be thin for the rest of your life. Let's call it the "How Can You Eat That Shit?" diet.

I'll tell you about the last time I ate a McDonald's burger.

I was coming home from work. It was a stressful day, so I had gone out for cocktails with my assistant (like I needed an excuse). I was a little early for my train, and I was hammered, and I was thinking that I needed some carbs. And salt. I went to McDonald's, ground zero of carbs and salt. Big Mac and fries.

One bite. And I thought: "This is disgusting."

Which it is, except for the first few fries. After that, the inside of your mouth feels like the Exxon Valdez disaster. For days.

Still, it would be worth it—calories, sodium, grease, and all—if it tasted fantastic. I love salty, greasy food. I have no problem wolfing down a sausage calzone. My husband can't be trusted around Doritos. What I *don't* like is salty, greasy, totally *nasty* food.

It's simply not worth it.

Now, banana splits? Those are fantastic, right? Especially with real ice cream and not some lame Froyo crap? But how many banana splits can you eat? Even if you eat one every day, my guess is you won't be eating much of anything else, so your calorie count will still be within reason. And you'll be happy. Gotta feed your head, too, you know.

You see how this works? Best. Diet. Ever.

Restaurant food? Yeah, there are some amazing restaurants out there. But how often can you afford to eat at them? If you answered "all the time," then you can afford a fat farm, too. And good doctors.

The bottom line is, by taking the pledge, you might end up cooking a lot of your own food. And when you cook your own food, not only will it be fantastic (if you use good recipes), but you'll burn calories while you cook. This is true. I read it on the internet.

Here's a pledge recipe for you, courtesy of my son Nino:

Venezuelan Chicken Salad

Chicken

Garlic

Red onion and/or scallions

Red bell pepper

Cilantro

Avocado

Lemon or lime juice

Greek yogurt

Salt and pepper

1. Roast a chicken (recipe: put a chicken in a big pan and roast it). Or buy one of those roasted chickens they sell at the grocery store. Which are sort of nasty, but not totally, and it's convenient.
2. Slice off the chicken breasts (hint: they're not the legs or the wings), put them in a big bowl, then take 2 forks and shred up the meat.
3. Chop and add some garlic, red onion or scallions, red bell pepper, and cilantro.
4. Mash up and add an avocado. Squeeze some fresh lemon or lime juice over it before you mix it in, so it doesn't turn brown.
5. Add about ½ cup of Greek yogurt. The avocado and the yogurt take the place of mayonnaise, which is in the totally nasty category. (Nino says he won't touch mayonnaise unless he's eating quality French fries. In Belgium.)
6. Salt and pepper to taste.

Everything in this chicken salad recipe qualifies as healthy food. And it's *fantastic*. Plus, you get to eat the rest of the chicken as leftovers. Stuff yourself.

"But, Connie," you might be saying, "What if I'm in the middle of nowhere, or Iowa, and there's no pledge-worthy food around?"

Then you have to make sacrifices. Anthony recommends Doritos and a Coke.

The Grand Gesture

Meatballs

My husband is the master of something we call in our house, The Grand Gesture.

This is an example of how The Grand Gesture works, with the English translation:

“Here, have the last meatball.” (**Translation** : “I want to eat the last meatball, but I would feel like a total dick if I just scarfed it down without asking. Though I thought about it.”)

“Maybe...”

“Go ahead!” (**Translation** : “Shit!”) “Take it.” (**Translation** : “Say no.”)

“You don’t want it?”

“You take it.” (**Translation** : “Say no.”)

“No, that’s okay.”

“Are you sure?” (**Translation** : “You’ve had four already, for chrissakes. You don’t *need* another meatball.”)

“I’m sure.”

“Go ahead and take it...” (**Translation** : “*Please* say no.”)

And so on. Until I swear *on the Madonna* that I don’t want the last meatball, after which he is cleared to eat it, guilt free.

Obviously, since I’ve lived with Anthony for more than forty years, I *know* he wants the last meatball. *He* knows I know it. But he’s gotta make The Grand Gesture, to keep up appearances. Usually, I just emphatically say no at the get-go and have another glass of wine.

The term “grand gesture” was added to our household vocabulary by one of our roommates, back in the day before the kids. He was also Italian. Italians generally have a low tolerance for bullshit, but this one votes Republican, go figure.

My kids act in opposite ways when faced with the last meatball and The Grand Gesture. Nino will cave, but not without an eye roll. Nicki will heartlessly eat it. Which I find refreshing.

So you know what the fuss is about, here’s a recipe for meatballs. Everybody’s got their own. This one is from my father-in-law. Updated by me. We don’t put them in the sauce. We just fry them and eat them on the side.

Meatballs

Ground meat—beef, pork, and veal, 2 lb.

Grated Romano cheese (about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup)

3 eggs

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup of milk

1 clove of garlic, crushed

Beef bouillon (loose, not cubes)

Salt, pepper, basil, parsley

White bread, 8 slices

1. Take a couple of pounds of ground meat and put it in a big bowl. I usually get a meatloaf mix of veal, beef, and pork. Sometimes you can only find it with beef and pork. It's all good, so don't worry about it.
2. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of grated cheese (I use parmesan; my father-in-law used Romano), 3 eggs, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of milk, 1 big clove (or 2) of crushed garlic, 2 tsp. of beef bouillon, 1 tsp. of salt, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. each of black pepper and basil, and some chopped parsley.
3. Now take 8 slices of bread and trim off the crusts. Give the crusts to the squirrels, but make sure you put the bread *far* away from your door, or the squirrels will someday try to break into your house and romance your cats. I have experience with this.
4. Hold the bread under running water for a few seconds until it's soaked, and then squeeze most of the water out.
5. Put the bread in the bowl with the rest of the stuff and mix thoroughly with your hands. Form into balls and fry in olive oil until very browned.

My father-in-law liked to flatten the balls a little before frying because he said they cook better that way. You can also make a meatloaf with this mixture. Or burgers. Or stuff a pepper or mushrooms with it. It's magic.

Just make sure you let your husband have the last meatball. That way, you see, he owes you.

St. Anthony's Day

Pesto

I hope you had a nice St. Anthony's Day.

St. Anthony is the Staccato household's patron saint. The main reason is that my husband Anthony was born on St. Anthony's day, June 13. This is something that would be immediately obvious to many Italians. It's how my mother got to be named Udenzia, poor lady. I managed to escape the cycle because I was a breach birth and my mother's first child. She was in a state of shock and on a lot of meds, which they give you if you really raise hell (recommended). So, while she was hallucinating, I was named Connie instead of Euthalia. Okay with me.

I've noticed that it's not a hard-and-fast rule, though. There aren't many guys named Blessed Waldo, which is what you get if you were born on New Year's Day and your father is hungover.

The other reason St. Anthony is our patron saint is that he's done us a few favors. His superpower is finding things. You want to find something, so you say:

St. Anthony, St. Anthony,
Please look around.
Something's been lost
And cannot be found.

And light a St. Anthony candle, if you have one (I buy them in bulk). Then St. Anthony finds you what you were looking for. I'm convinced that he's the reason my son Nino found a job in Boston after narrowly escaping a job offer in Memphis. And if you've ever had cannoli from Mike's in Boston, you know why St. Anthony is worthy of our devotion.

We celebrate June 13 with a prayer of thanks to the good saint for rescuing me from a future of chicken fried steak. And I make some birthday treats for my husband. This year, he got a calzone (see *Pizza Rustica* recipe) and a nice pesto made from my very own basil plants. Lucky man!

Don't eat this if you're planning to kiss anyone but your own children.

Pesto

Pine nuts

Fresh basil leaves (a lot)

Garlic

Grated parmesan cheese

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

1. Toast about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of pine nuts in the oven. Just a few minutes—watch them, or they'll burn.
2. In a blender or a food processor put the pine nuts, 2 cups (packed) of fresh basil leaves, 2 cloves of raw garlic, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of grated parmesan cheese, and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of olive oil.
3. Salt and pepper to taste, but go light on the salt.
4. Blend.

You can toss the pesto with pasta or use it for a pizza, but why? All you need is some good Italian bread, cheese, a sliced tomato, and some wine. Maybe a little vintage Dino crooning on your stereo for ambience.

You've found the perfect summer dinner. Thank you, St. Anthony.

Ghost Story

Veal Marsala

My daughter Nicki works for an attorney.

The job's pretty good. She gets a decent salary. She goes downtown every day. The work is sort of interesting, and the attorney's not a bad guy. The only major problem is one of her coworkers.

We've all been there. I don't have the heart to tell her that as soon as you get rid of one, another one just crops up in her place. It's like they're ordered from the Batshit Crazy Coworker Factory, on special.

This particular piece of work eats off-season purple Peeps for breakfast, wears clothes that tell you where her trailer is parked, whistles, maintains a running commentary about her three ex-husbands, and mouths off to the boss. Pretty standard issue. To top it off, she has a bizarre name. I can't tell you what it is for legal reasons, but I will tell you that:

1. It rhymes.
2. It's hilariously descriptive.

And it's not even her maiden name. It's, like, the name of her second ex-husband. She *chose* to keep the name, which tells me that this woman might have some redeeming qualities after all.

One day, Nicki told me a story about work. They were all sitting around the lunchroom, talking about lasagna or something, when suddenly Miss Congeniality piped in with, "I don't believe in ghosts." She proceeded to describe some creepy event that—she is sure—had *nothing* to do with ghosts. Because, you know, only stupid people believe in ghosts. And on and on, until everybody remembered they had some work to do.

So I said to Nicki, "Oh, yeah? Did you tell her about the **Veal Marsala from Beyond**?"

She didn't, because that would have prolonged the agony. But I defy *anyone* to tell me they don't believe in ghosts after hearing this story.

Once upon a time, about thirty years ago, my friend Babs called me up and said, "I need your veal marsala recipe."

“Hold on,” I said, and went to grab my favorite Italian cookbook. Only my favorite Italian cookbook wasn’t there. “Let me call you back.”

I turned the house upside down every which way to Tuesday. No cookbook. This was the out-of-print, Culinary Arts Institute of Chicago 1954, best-marinara-recipe-ever cookbook that my father-in-law had given me in the hopes that maybe I could cook something good once in a while. A little pamphlet of a thing. And the freaking *mother lode* of amazing Italian recipes.

It was gone.

I looked everywhere. I scoured the basement. I called my brother-in-law, who was managing a restaurant in England, and accused him of taking it. I tried to find a used copy somewhere. No go. *Niente* . Zip.

I was heartbroken.

About a year later, I went to visit my grandfather. We were sitting in the kitchen, when suddenly I remembered that I had given the book to my grandmother for the *stufoli* recipe a few months before she died. Could it be? I ran over to the bookshelf where my grandmother kept all her cookbooks and searched. And searched. Looked at every title.

Not there.

I sadly returned to the kitchen. And that’s when I heard **The Voice** . Right in my ear. I am not making this up. It was my grandmother’s voice, like she was standing next to me. And she said, “Go back and look again. You idiot.”

My grandmother was one of these legendary Sicilian women that most people only know about from scary Mafia movies. People like her rule their worlds with an iron hand and must be obeyed, even after they’ve met St. Peter personally. I went *back* to the bookshelf, pulled out the *first* cookbook I saw, opened it, and...

...there it was. My cookbook. Stuck in between the pages.

I’m telling you, these women are so powerful they can—and will—reach across *dimensions* to make sure you get the veal marsala right.

Veal Marsala from Beyond

Olive oil

Garlic

Flour

Salt and pepper

Veal cutlets
Marsala wine
Water
Parsley

1. In a big skillet, one you have a lid for, brown some chopped garlic in about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of olive oil.
2. Put a cup of flour in a deep plate and stir some salt and pepper into it.
3. Dip the veal cutlets in the flour and fry them in the oil.
4. In a bowl, mix: $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of Marsala wine, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of water, chopped parsley, salt, and pepper.
5. Pour this over the veal and cover the skillet. Cook on *very* low heat until the veal is tender, about 20 minutes. Add a little more water if it gets too thick.

So there you go, Ms. Skanky Pants, bane of my daughter's professional existence. Just because nobody bothers to contact *you* from The Beyond (to make sure you get the *purple* Peeps), doesn't mean they're not out there. It just means they don't want to talk to *you* .

I'm lucky. I've got a ghost who not only knows how to cook Italian, but also knows I'm an idiot.

Thanks, Grandma.

Before I Cook More

Raspberry/Nectarine Stuff

I'm a little stressed out. More than usual. So, I'm cooking.

I've been cooking for two days. And I might not be able to stop. What's stressing me out? This:

1. My father's sick, and it's not good.
2. My cousin's daughter just broke up with her boyfriend after eight years. (A cousin's daughter is a close relative in a Sicilian family.) Also, not good. Girls, listen to me, I know what I'm talking about: if he's still a boyfriend after eight years, he's a dirtball. Set a time limit, and stick to it.
3. I started a new job. And I'm trying to publish my first book. And it's all getting me a little nervous, you know?

So far, I've made:

1. Sausages
2. Potato salad
3. Cranberry sauce
4. Linguine marinara
5. A raspberry/nectarine pie

This sounds like more work than it was. The sausages (chicken/spinach/feta) were store-bought and delicious, *I* thought, though I'll probably never eat them again because Anthony prefers the traditional heart-attack-on-a-plate variety.

The potato salad was an experiment. I boiled some peeled and cut-up yellow potatoes and tossed them with a chopped red bell pepper, some Greek yogurt, dill, parsley, salt, and pepper. Meh. I'm going to split the leftovers in two and add brown mustard to one, avocado and lemon juice to the other. I'll let you know. (My editor is saying, "Nu, how was it?" And I'm saying, "Just make guacamole.")

The cranberry sauce I'll give you with the Thanksgiving recipes. I have issues with making cranberry sauce at any other time of the year, but Anthony can't live without the stuff, so I make it with frozen berries. It works. Sort of. But it's not the same. Still, you

gotta keep your old man happy.

The linguine marinara was perfect. It always is.

The big surprise was the raspberry/nectarine pie. Wonderful. It never really made it to a pie, because Anthony only likes the filling, and I prefer to save my calories for alcohol. So it stopped at being a compote. I patched together a couple of different recipes:

Raspberry/Nectarine Stuff

Nectarines, 4

Sugar

Flour

Salt

Water

Fresh raspberries, 1 small package

1. Cut 4 nectarines into pieces. Don't bother to peel them. (I don't have to tell you to throw away the pits, right?) Set them aside.
2. In a saucepan, put $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of sugar, 2 Tbsp. of flour, and a pinch of salt. Mix it together, and then add 3 Tbsp. of water. Stir until it's a liquid.
3. Add the nectarines to the saucepan. Stir again.
4. On medium heat, bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Turn the heat down to a simmer and cook and stir for two minutes. Then turn off the heat.
5. Add a small package of fresh raspberries (rinse them first).
6. Done. Put it in a pie crust and bake it, if you want. Or serve over yogurt or ice cream.

My kitchen is the perfect place to hide when I'm stressed out because:

1. It's quiet. My friend Babs complains that her husband doesn't talk to her. I say count your blessings. Mine never shuts up.
2. It's small. I like womb-like places. Only one person at a time can fit in my kitchen. Two at the most.
3. There's wine in it.

And good food to soothe the soul.

Woulda. Shoulda. Coulda.

There are certain consequences that go along with being Italian.

Some consequences are good:

1. You've got great skin. After the acne clears up.
2. If you've taken it easy on the cannoli, you have the ass of a goddess.
3. And if you're smart, you learned how to cook from your mother. No man in his right mind will ever leave your lasagna for some skinny blonde.

Some consequences are bad:

1. You are incapable of responding calmly to stressful situations. Any stressful situation. Just forget about it.
2. This can cause a lot of problems.

It's genetic, so it's not your fault. In Italy, Italians drink wine to calm down. In Italy (where we really belong), you can have wine for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In fact, it's encouraged because it keeps the taxes down. Emergency response teams are expensive.

Americans, though, tend to be fussy about day drinking. I think it's the whole car culture thing, which needs to go away for a lot of reasons, but probably won't. Too bad. Americans should remember the 1980s and their three-martini lunches. People were happy. They thought they were happy because Ronald Reagan was president, but it was the martinis, believe me.

Italian Americans usually deal with wine deprivation by consuming mass quantities of coffee, which only makes them crazier. Then they get a rep for being excitable, taking offense at every little thing, and having hair-trigger tempers. I won't argue that, but what do you expect when you take away the wine?

I wish I had a gallon of the stuff the other day.

I'm Sicilian, so it's much worse. People think of us as being silent, stony-faced types (2,500 years of foreign occupation will do that to you), but underneath this exterior, we're boiling. In fact, I'd say the stonier we get, the more you've got to worry about.

As long as we're yelling, you're okay, but remember Al Pacino in

The Godfather ? The way he got right before he smacked Diane Keaton? She was pushing every button he had while he stared at her blankly. Then, suddenly, he started to shake and—wham! Mt. Etna, right in the face. And it wasn't all acting, I'm telling you, given her performance.

I have this summer job as a host to visitors at a theater in a museum. One of my responsibilities is to get people to be nice and stand in line. It's not easy. As soon as you tell people to form a line, they go brain dead. And act like you want them to walk off a cliff.

So, the other day I had finally gotten my line in order, when this little boy in a wheelchair showed up with his family. I took a few minutes to get them situated in the theater (he was a legitimate priority, am I right?), and when I got back, the line had disintegrated into an angry mob.

Led by an English guy, I think, by the accent. Or maybe Australian, which is easier to make fun of.

He started hollering at me about how I didn't explain things properly (it's a fucking *line*, you idiot, only two goddamn dimensions for you to figure out). And then some other visitors got in on it, acting like big unswaddled babies, and then the whole crowd started pushing like they were going to miss the last game of the World Cup Finals if they didn't start a stampede.

I had like two seconds to make a decision. And my decision was to let the most hysterical morons go first. Which obviously made everyone else unhappy (*damn* those little boys in wheelchairs), but probably saved their lives. And mine.

I'm not proud of that decision.

I tried to stay calm. I really did. I might have *looked* calm at first, even though my brains were congealing like eggs in a frittata. And then I could feel the steam trying to escape through my ears. The crowd got quiet when that happened. Probably because they started noticing my resemblance to Al Pacino.

Later on, I got to thinking. Woulda. Shoulda. Coulda. Had my mind been functional:

1. I *woulda* alternated between the line with the normal people, and the one with the gagootzes headed up by Crocodile Dundee. You go, they go, you go, they go. Fair enough? No. But this was a lose-lose deal.
2. I *shoulda* smiled sweetly and said, "Let me call my

manager.” Then the asshole would have had to wait, and he *still* would’ve been the last in line. Fair enough? Absolutely.

3. I *coulda* said, “Hey! Man from Snowy River! Get outta my face. You don’t like it, take it up with my boss. Or you and me can settle it later, outside. Your choice.” I like this option. A lot.

Of course, a *real* Sicilian would have just followed the guy back to his hotel and bribed a bellhop to put superglue in his shoes.

I shoulda.

Good Advice

Stuffed Artichokes

Snooki. I am so sorry, girl!

Now, before you go and put the *mal occhio* on your rat bastard husband, talk to your mother. If she's anything like my grandmother, she'll roll her eyes and give you some good advice.

My grandmother told me two things about men.

1. "Put them all in a paper bag and reach in and get one."
2. "He can put his shoes by my bed anytime."

The second thing was in reference to Luciano Pavarotti.

The first thing, Snooki, means that men are not all that special. You got one you like, great. Does he bring home a check? Bonus points. Does he beat you? No? He's a keeper.

And don't defend him. He doesn't need defending, *you* need defending. If you try to defend him, you're just going to sound like Tammy Wynette. Or a politician's wife.

Online dating? A better use of your time would be biting your nails over the next election.

My grandmother also taught me how to make baby artichokes. These are better than men.

Stuffed Baby Artichokes

Artichokes, small, 8 to 10

Bread crumbs

Grated cheese (Romano, parmesan, and/or Pecorino)

Oregano, basil, parsley, garlic salt, pepper

Olive oil

Butter

1. Look for the little artichokes in the grocery store. They're hard to find. You can make this recipe with big artichokes, too, but big artichokes are a pain in the ass because they're tough, so keep your eye out for the little ones.
2. Once you have your baby artichokes (depending on their size, you'll need 8 to 10), trim them. You do this with a bread knife. Cut the bottom stems so they're flat with the

rest of the bottom of the artichokes, then saw off about ½ inch straight across the tops. Rinse the artichokes and set them aside.

3. Now, make a stuffing. Mix about 2 cups of bread crumbs with some grated cheese, some Italian spices (oregano, basil, parsley, etc.), garlic salt, and black pepper. If you run low, make some more. The proportions don't really matter. Use whatever you like, but try not to overdo the basil.
4. Put about 1 inch of water in the bottom of a casserole dish. Take the little artichokes, spread open the leaves a bit, and put them in the dish. As many as you can fit. Sprinkle the stuffing over them (some of it will fall into the leaves).
5. Drizzle with olive oil. Cover the dish tightly with foil and bake in a 350°F oven for an hour or so until tender.
6. Serve with copious amounts of melted butter.

If you don't know how to eat a stuffed artichoke, go on YouTube and watch a tutorial. It's an art. And get ready for one of the best experiences of your life.

You can't find *this* kind of love online, Snooki. Maybe someday your husband will figure it out.

Act Normal

Melrose Peppers

So why is a nice, used-to-be-a-Catholic girl drinking a double vodka martini at three o'clock in the afternoon?

I'll tell you why.

Because last Tuesday I got a call from the people who did my annual mammogram. They said the result was abnormal and they needed to do some more images. And maybe an ultrasound. Oh, yeah, and maybe an MRI and/or a biopsy.

What?

"Why?" I asked. Which was a perfectly legitimate question, I thought. And I asked it politely, even though my brain was going supernova at that moment and I couldn't breathe. Let's see a show of hands out there of you ladies who wouldn't have had the same reaction.

Naturally, they got all vague about it and referred me to my doctor, who was equally vague. I couldn't figure out if my doctor was being vague because she figured I was basically a goner, or because she lists running as one of her hobbies in her online profile. It's a tough call.

Also, naturally, they couldn't fit me in for more images until this Tuesday. So I've had a bad week. But they *did* promise that the radiologist would be right there to read the images and give me the good or bad news immediately, and that was something, at least.

What did I do for seven days? Well, I prepared myself for the absolute worst-case scenario, figuring that anything less would be a nice surprise. And I decided who I was going to leave my second-hand Ferragamos to.

And I tried to act normal. Like I even know what that is.

Today was D-Day, and zero hour was two o'clock this afternoon. Anthony said he would wait in the car. I said, "Like hell, you will," but nicer. Like a normal person. I think.

Let me tell you, without giving too much information, round two of a mammogram makes round one look like a tarantella. I'm just saying, if men had to have this test on their *coglioni*, they'd all be history.

I had to sit in a room to wait for the results, which was maybe the longest ten minutes of my life. Fortunately, there was a *People*

magazine there so I could numb my mind.

Finally, the sweet lady who almost ripped my mammaries off my chest (“Stand back, just a little. I don’t want to catch your rib between the plates”), came in with the results.

“All clear.”

The Ferragamos were still mine.

Anthony actually kissed me. In public. Then he suggested we go out for some soup and a milkshake. A real party animal, that Anthony. I let him know that I preferred the liquor store. Seven days can be an eternity.

Hence the vodka martini. And tonight, we’re going to feast on Melrose peppers.

Melrose Peppers

Melrose peppers are long, thin, sweet peppers that got their name because Italian people in Melrose Park grew them and sold them at South Water Market in Chicago. They brought the seeds with them from Italy, though I haven’t a clue what they call them there.

You can be declared legally dead and still cook Melrose peppers. You don’t even have to trim them. Just wash them, dry them, throw them in a big roasting pan with some sliced garlic, rub with olive oil, and add salt and pepper. Pour a little more olive oil over them, and then roast in a 350°F oven for about an hour until the peppers turn sort of brown. (I like mine real brown; Anthony likes his on the green side.) Pull the stems off before eating.

They make great sandwiches and frittatas.

Melrose peppers are considered exotic delicacies, though the people in Melrose Park might be surprised to hear this. They can be green or red. We always buy them green. They’re hard to find at the grocery store. You have to wait for them to be in season (middle to end of summer) and then buy huge quantities. After the peppers are cooked you can freeze them, and they’ll stay good for three blessed, beautiful months.

Ordeal officially over, thank you, St. Anthony. Now I need to go wipe the lipstick off the vodka bottle and get on with my life.

I’m not saying who was gonna get the Ferragamos.

It's Pronounced "Fazool"

Pasta Fazool *Marinara Soup*

I was reading an article on the internet the other day, titled something like "Words You Pronounce Incorrectly at an Italian Restaurant." The writer was clearly not Italian, unless Italian restaurants have their own language, a language I've never heard before. Which may be the case, based on my experience in American Italian restaurants. And I could say the same for the food.

At any rate, for the record, the word is broo-SKET, not broo-SHET-a, I don't care what the probably not-Italian waiter says.

Also, for the record, American Italian really *is* its own dialect. When a language lives in another country for more than a hundred years, it takes on its own life.

For example, the dish pasta *e fagioli* . Now, in Italian-Italian, this is pronounced (more or less, depending on what part of Italy the speaker in question lives) pahs-tah-eh-fah-jo-lee. In America, it's pasta fazool. Pronounced phonetically.

Pasta fazool is a vegan's dream, though if you said "vegan" to many Italian people, they would give you a blank stare. Pasta fazool has vegetables (garlic and tomatoes) and protein (beans, that's the fazool part). And fiber, if you use whole wheat pasta, which I do. In my opinion, the jury's still out on whole wheat pasta. I think it tastes just as good, so I use it, but I'm convinced that any day now the geniuses of the food science world are gonna come out and tell us that semolina is the secret to living *cent'anni* . Mark my words.

Pasta Fazool

Dried white beans

Marinara sauce

Pasta

Basil, salt, pepper

1. Cook 1 pound of white beans according to the package directions.
2. While the beans are cooking, make a marinara sauce in a big pot (see recipe for The Stuff of Dreams).
3. When the beans are done, pour out most—but not all—of

the water. Leave a little liquid.

4. In another pot, cook about a third of a pound of pasta (we use ditalini, but you can use whatever you want).
5. Pour the beans into the marinara sauce.
6. Drain the pasta and put that in too.
7. Add salt, pepper, and basil to taste. Go easy on the basil. Too much, and it'll be the only thing you taste.

If you want to turn this recipe into soup, you can throw in some chicken broth. And a package of frozen spinach. And now you have Marinara Soup, one of our favorites. Here's the express version:

Marinara Soup

Make a batch of marinara sauce in a big pot. Add chicken broth, like the College Inn in-a-box stuff. Rinse and add a can of white beans. Now add 1 cup of water and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of orzo. Orzo is small pasta that resembles rice. Anthony likes it. But any small pasta will do. Simmer rapidly for about 10 minutes, and then throw in a package of frozen spinach. When the spinach isn't frozen any more, you got soup.

So I used canned beans. Don't judge.

Rated R

Lentil Soup

Some foods are for mature audiences only.

Asparagus. Guacamole. Beets. Olives. Liver. Calamari. Grapefruit. Sardines. These are definitely foods for adults—*way* beyond the comprehension of kids, except for the ones who grow up and listen to Zappa. Then, one day, sometime around their eighteenth birthday, most kids will give one of these foods a try, and then all bets are off. They can't get enough.

Now consider lentil soup. From the point of view of a kid.

Otherwise known as pasta *lenticchie* (pronounced “lin-deek”), lentil soup holds very little appeal for a child. It's brown, and sort of mushy, and—let's be honest—it looks like somebody already ate it. I wouldn't even *try* it when I was a kid, no matter *what* my parents were threatening me with, and my parents were pretty good with the threats.

Then, one day, magic.

As an adult, I now think that lentil soup is wonderful, though I usually prefer food I can chew. But Anthony and the kids, who are soup monsters, *love* this stuff. And I love cooking it because:

1. I love my husband and my kids.
2. You could be in the final stages of rigor mortis and still make lentil soup in fifteen minutes.

Bonus points: Lentil soup is vegan. And incredibly good for you. And now I'm going to stop sounding like every person I've ever held in contempt.

Lentil Soup

Lentils

Italian plum tomatoes, 1 big can

Onion

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

Pasta

1. Pour a bag of lentils into a strainer.

2. Rinse them “real good, 4 to 5 times”—thus spake my grandmother.
3. Put the lentils in a pot with about 5 inches of water. Add 1 big can of Italian tomatoes, 1 chopped onion, 5 tsp. of olive oil, 1 Tbsp. of salt, and 1 tsp. of black pepper.
4. Bring to a boil, cover the pot, turn down the heat, and let it simmer for 1½ hours.
5. In another pot, cook about ⅓ of a pound of broken-up spaghetti. Drain and add to the lentils.

You can eat lentil soup straight or add a little wine vinegar at the table. And/or you can put a dollop of Greek yogurt on top of it. And/or some crushed red pepper. It's all good.

Leftover lentil soup tends to dry out and get thick, which makes it perfect for stuffing into a pita, so now you have a sandwich. And it travels well.

Welcome to adulthood. There are benefits.

It's a Miracle

Escarole and Bean Soup

Miracle Soup didn't start out to be Miracle Soup. It started out to be 'scarole and beans, and then I canonized it. If you ascribe to the philosophy that food is medicine, this stuff is right up there with the Salk vaccine. Don't get me wrong. 'Scarole and beans is delicious. But it also works wonders when you're sick and miserable and invoking St. Anthony isn't working. Miracles are few and far between these days. I mean, if we take—at face value—what Sister Barbara told us in the first grade, people used to go around parting the Red Sea, raising the dead, and turning water into wine all the time. Nowadays, we can't even get a fucking faucet to stop leaking.

Here are the miraculous ingredients: 'scarole (escarole, but nobody even vaguely Italian calls it that) so you get your greens (lots of vitamins), beans (protein, iron, fiber), garlic (proof that God loves us), olive oil (you'll live a hundred years), and chicken broth (a miracle in and of itself). And if you serve it with a substantial amount of crushed red pepper, it'll clear out your chest and sinuses.

Trust me.

' Scarole and Beans (Miracle Soup)

Dried white beans

Chicken broth, 1 big box or 3 cans

Escarole, 2 bunches

Garlic

Olive oil

Salt, pepper, basil

1. Cook 1 pound of white beans according to the package directions.
2. While that's going on, put about 6 cups of chicken broth in a big pot.
3. Take 2 large bunches of 'scarole, wash them, tear up the leaves, and put them in the pot with the chicken broth. (It'll look like a *lot* of 'scarole, but don't worry, it cooks down.)
4. Bring the chicken broth to a boil, cover the pot, and turn down the heat until it's just simmering. Simmer for about

an hour.

5. When the beans are done, pour off most of the excess water, but don't drain them completely. You want some of the bean juice left in there.
6. Take half a head of garlic, chop it fine, and brown it lightly in about a quarter cup of olive oil. Stir the garlic and olive oil into the beans, heat through, and then pour the beans into the 'scarole.
7. Salt and pepper to taste, and you can add a little basil if you want. Serve with crushed red pepper.
8. Some people brown Italian sausage and put it in the soup. But why.

"Connie," you might be saying, "that's a lot of work to do when I'm sick." And you'd be right, so if you don't have somebody else to do the cooking for you, use the next recipe.

Miracle Express

Garlic

Olive oil

White beans, 1 can

Chicken broth, 1 big box or 3 cans

Frozen spinach, 1 package

Salt, pepper, basil

Pour $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of olive oil into a soup pot. Brown 6 to 8 cloves of chopped garlic in it. Turn off the heat. Open 1 can of white beans and add it to the olive oil and garlic, bean juice and all. Heat through. Add 1 big box (or 3 cans) of chicken broth. Bring to a boil. Throw in 1 package of frozen spinach. Bring to a boil again, turn down the heat and let simmer a few minutes. Add salt, pepper, and basil. Eat with crushed red pepper. As much as you can stand.

Take my word for it, you will feel lots better. But you don't have to wait until you're sick. Miracle soup is a great preventative, too. And we use it as our detox meal, if we've been eating a lot of meat lately. It truly is a miracle. My husband is eighty-eight years old and only sees the doctor once a year. As a formality.

What better proof?

Four Ingredients

Sausage and Mushroom Sauce

Here's another sauce that you could make even if you were in a coma. Or if you had a bambino on your hip, another one holding onto your leg, and your father-in-law at the kitchen table in his boxer shorts telling you what you're doing wrong. Obviously, I'm acquainted with the situation, as are many Italian women. I don't think there's any form of legislation that could change it.

This sauce is rich, spicy, and visually dazzling. And it has four ingredients. Count 'em—four. It's supposed to be served over polenta, but Sicilians don't eat polenta, so I serve it over mostaccioli. You can serve it over anything you want. My alien husband puts it over yogurt and has it for breakfast because that's how they eat on his home planet.

Sausage and Mushroom Sauce

Italian plum tomatoes, 2 large cans

Italian sausage, the hot stuff, 2 lbs.

Olive oil

Sliced fresh mushrooms

1. Put 2 cans of Italian tomatoes into a large pot and bring to a simmer.
2. Cut up 2 lb. of hot Italian sausage into small pieces and fry them in some olive oil in a big cast iron pan. *Do not drain*.
3. With a slotted spoon, add the fried sausage to the simmering tomatoes.
4. Now—and this is fun—fry a bunch of sliced mushrooms in the sausage drippings. Add a little more olive oil if you need to. Not only will the sausage drippings make your mushrooms taste like heaven, but the mushrooms will clean the sausage stuff off of the pan. I kid you not. That's one of the reasons why I like to make this sauce.
5. Add the mushrooms to the tomatoes and sausage, and simmer until the tomatoes get super soft and you can smash them up against the side of the pot with your wooden spoon. At the risk of sounding passive-aggressive (I *know*, Nicki), I'd say about 2 hours. That gives the sausage

some time to season the sauce.

Taste it. If it needs salt, add salt. But then you'll have five ingredients. Oh, well.

Italians: Endgame

Spumoni

What do you do after you eat a gargantuan amount of incredible Italian food? You have dessert. Just a little something sweet to go with your coffee. Not too much, or you'll end up exploding like that guy in the Monty Python movie, which would not be a good thing if you're on a date.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time talking about desserts. My general feeling on the subject is this is why God gave us spumoni. Maybe a cookie to go with. Or cannoli, if it's your birthday. Cannoli cake if it's your wedding.

The cookies and cannoli come from the bakery. The spumoni comes from the freezer via the grocery store. *Tutto finito*.

That being said, my husband's Aunt Geraldine used to make spectacular homemade cannoli for Christmas, substituting chocolate and vanilla pudding for the ricotta filling. The traditional way to make a cannoli shell is to wrap the dough around a piece of wooden broom handle and fry it until it's crispy. I'm sure you did not know this. It's a great way to recycle a broom. Wash it first.

On the other hand, if you're adventurous, or bored, you can always actually *make* a dessert. The most spectacular dessert I know of is my pecan pie, but that doesn't go very well with Italian food. It goes with the Thanksgiving food. I know it's spectacular because I just got back from Nino's graduation, where several people from several different nations told me so. And these people are not stupid because Nino graduated from Harvard, so all his friends are smart. And he apparently spent a certain amount of time baking pecan pies with the aim of bribing these people to be his friends.

Successfully.

That's *Harvard*, mind you. And Nicki attended the University of Chicago. So there's no shortage of brains in the Staccato family, unless you take into account our oldest cat Moof, who's the dumbest lump of fur who ever hacked up a hairball. But she's fluffy. And she purrs a lot. Which is *her* way of bribing people to be her friends, since—lacking intelligence and opposable thumbs—she can't bake a pecan pie.

But even *she* could probably figure out how to get spumoni out of a freezer.

The Most Wonderful Time

The second part of this book is all about holiday cooking. It's important to me that my children be able to recreate the sacred culinary rituals of their childhood. Because that's where the memories live. With my grandmother's recipes come memories of my grandmother's kitchen. There was a big round table, a bottomless pot of coffee, and huge vats of food from which everybody just helped themselves. The cast iron frying pan never left the top of the stove. There were jars of candy, boxes from the bakery, a spice rack on the wall, and pictures of saints. There were aunts and uncles and cousins, and always a high chair at the table because there was always a new bambino. When he wasn't sweeping the floor or making toast, my grandfather would "cha-cha" with the babies, crooning Sicilian baby talk. And he would sometimes try to get amorous with my grandmother while she was washing dishes. Which prompted a look that would melt lead, and she would yell "Go to sleep!" because she didn't want to say "hell" in front of the kids.

Totally worth recreating.

The kitchen was essentially the only room in the house, except for the bedrooms (which had no doors, and where the children were literally packed like sardines in the limited number of beds at night), and the living room with the plastic-covered furniture, where we weren't allowed to go unless a priest was visiting.

The kitchen was also where much of the holiday magic happened.

In my grandmother's kitchen, I learned that cooking for a holiday takes organization. And timing. And courage. And I'm going to show you how I do the major ones: Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Maybe you've already got this, and you don't need me at all. Okay, fine. Maybe. But *maybe* you're a brave soul and—for the first time—you want to invite all your friends (who can't face another holiday meal with their insane relatives) over to your house for dinner. Maybe holiday meals are *always* at your house, with *your* insane relatives, and you've managed it all okay but you'd like it to be a little easier since drinking before five (on most days) without a good reason (of which there are many during the holiday season) shouldn't be your only option.

Or *maybe* , you used to be the Secretary of State, and your washed-up husband has a habit of coming home, like, three days before any random holiday and announcing that his entire yahoo hillbilly family will be having dinner at your house *again* , in spite of the fact that you've traveled to 122 countries in the last 36 months and now you've got to get ready to run for president and you're *really freaking busy* .

Holidays can be intimidating. Not only do you have to cook and eat a piece of meat or poultry the size of a dwarf planet, but you also have to host a bunch of people who are not normally privy to your particular set of idiosyncrasies. So, your house has to be reasonably clean, and you have to remember not to do anything that would disqualify you as a foster parent.

Holidays are important, too, because life is inherently terrifying. As human beings, we're blessed with the awareness of our own mortality. And then, like rats caught in the maze of a psychiatrist with a bad attitude and given an electric shock every time we go for that tasty bit of provolone, we are constantly reminded that all the fun stuff—which could possibly make the whole mortality awareness thing a little more tolerable—is bad for us.

Thus, we *need* our holidays, times when all restrictions on hedonism are suspended, like in Japanese pachinko parlors. Holidays should be a time when we press the reset button on our sanity.

In theory, at least. Instead, they're stressful. Take Thanksgiving. Entertaining in the shadow of Black Friday is like celebrating Apocalypse Eve. If you have small children and/or a job, it's even worse, and nobody's going to cut you any slack. Yeah, you'll get offers to help and people generally will bring something. But that includes Aunt Mary Rose who's going to bring you a gallon of Gallo, which you will have to drink because it would kill the grass.

You've got to make your own slack.

I've got this down to a science because I don't like stress. I'm all about baby steps and doing things up ahead of time. I play small ball. That way it doesn't matter if your psychotic boss, who has no family and who's deathly afraid of that *cafone* of a regional manager (who *does* have a family, but they've got no use for him), tells you that you have to stay until 6:00 p.m. on the day before the holiday and be back at work at 7:00 a.m. on the day after. I've been there. I know.

You are welcome to cook my recipes, or you can roast boar's ribs for all I care. Italian American holiday celebrations can be Italian or American or both, food-wise. What's important is the process. You are taking a huge project, breaking it down, and making it easy. It's a life skill that makes you look like a boss. So, whatever you cook, be prepared that you might emerge from the experience fully ensconced as the family matriarch.

Which will forever spare you from spending any of your future holidays at Aunt Mary Rose's house, sitting on a plastic-covered couch, listening to the story about how her husband ran off with the twenty-six-year-old Guatemalan gardener.

And drinking Gallo.

Festeggiamo

Easter

Easter, Part 1—The Menu

Start with a plan.

Yes, recipes are important, even (and maybe especially) the “little of this...little of that” type of recipe that you probably absorbed by osmosis while you were sitting around your mother’s kitchen. Recipes give you the general guidelines of what tastes good and how to cook it without poisoning anybody. But recipes are just part of a larger whole. To put together a meal, especially a holiday meal by which you will be judged for the rest of your life, you need a plan. And that plan is called a menu. It’s your first step in the creation of what’s going to become a sacred tradition.

Holiday menus in the Staccato house are pretty much invariable. That’s because, over time, we’ve figured out what works well together, what the kids will eat, what’s good *and* easy, and what’s just *way* too much of a pain in the ass to cook under any circumstances. Please note that nutritional value is not one of the criteria. Not that being nutritious would automatically exclude a dish from the holiday menu, it’s just that I take the word “holiday” literally.

Now I’m going to give you a little homework.

Written homework. Just like Sister Arnoldine in the fourth grade, who really didn’t like us, and with good reason. *Unlike* Sister Arnoldine, I’m going to recommend a little vino to accompany this project. After all, these are your opening ceremonies. You’re doing the work, so why not make it fun?

You start by counting your guests. I, myself, am going to skip that step since I make the same amount of food—which is enormous—no matter who’s coming. This year, for instance, my son has better things to do than have Easter with his family. (He’s going to Spain, the little bastard, and he’d better bring me back something nice.) For maybe a minute I thought about modifying the menu, but then I ran it by my daughter, who was *horrified* by the idea of having her traditions messed with, so it’s business as usual. If you end up with too much food, you can always give it away to your guests or feed off it for weeks.

Write out your menu. It will become the basis for your shopping list. See sample as follows.

The Staccato House Easter Menu

Baked ham

Egg and cheese strata

Roasted potatoes and onions

Asparagus with brown butter

Hard-boiled eggs (dyed)

Fruit salad

Lamb cake

Coffee

Lots of sparkly wine (like, we're celebrating a *resurrection* here)

Easter baskets (you know you still want one, Nicki)

DO cook anything you want. These are just suggestions. *Good* suggestions, but suggestions.

DO start your menu with your main dish and work around that.

DO include fruits and vegetables on your menu. Remember the Hungry Caterpillar.

DO plan on making soup with that hambone. (If you remember "hot ham water" then we can be best friends.)

DON'T start drinking until you're done using knives.

Now you can start working on the shopping list. I suggest you do it at least two weeks in advance because you won't believe how much you forget, and this gives your long-term memory (the only memory I have that still functions) a chance to work. Computers were made for this job. Type everything up and save it. You can always edit it if you forgot something, if you want to add something, or if cousin Guido's on a modified paleo diet and only eats meat that he kills.

Come next Easter, it'll be that much easier.

Easter, Part 2—The Shopping List

It's Monday of Holy Week. And my husband says to me this morning, "Let's go shopping." By shopping, Anthony means the grocery store. With a list.

"Good idea," I say. "Sunday is Easter."

"Sunday is Easter? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Isn't Easter at the *end* of April?"

"It varies."

"Really?"

"Look, call up one of your buddies—you know, someone you can *trust*—and ask *him* if Sunday is Easter."

(Offended silence. This, from a man who has to ask—every year, and in spite of the fact that we have a calendar on the wall in the kitchen—when Thanksgiving is. To be fair, he does pretty well with New Year's Day and the Fourth of July.)

Shopping? No problem. I walk over to my computer, fish up the "Easter Shopping List" out of my documents, and print it. Okay, honey, let's go.

Here's my shopping list. You can use it if you're going to do my menu:

Easter Shopping List

- Ham, gigantic, bone-in
- 8 baking potatoes
- 2 large onions
- 3 bunches of asparagus
- Green grapes, on the small side
- 2 large jars of maraschino cherries
- 1 large can of mandarin orange segments
- 2 large cans of pineapple chunks
- 3 dozen eggs, white (Ever dye a brown Easter egg? It's depressing.)
- 2 large packages of shredded cheddar cheese (the 4-cup size)
- 1 gallon of whole milk

- Half-and-half (for coffee)
- 3 small cartons of heavy whipping cream
- 1 small container of sour cream
- 2 lb. of butter
- 3 big loaves of cheap, sliced bread
- Dry mustard
- Coffee
- Wine
- Lamb cake
- Easter candy (for Easter baskets. Last year we scored some jelly beans that came in a tin in the shape of a cross, which contained the “black jelly bean of death.” Fucking brilliant.)
- Food coloring (for Easter eggs)
- White vinegar (also for Easter eggs, you only need a little)
- 3 large disposable aluminum roasting pans

Some of this is overkill, I know, but better than having half a strata done and running out of cheese. Anthony and I bought everything on the list except for the fresh fruits and vegetables (we'll get those on Good Friday) and the lamb cake. My friend Alicia will bring that, along with more wine, bless her. Everything we bought will keep just fine for a while. Cheap, packaged bread is indestructible, and ham lasts forever. In fact, I'm surprised that no archaeologist has ever dug up an ancient ham.



Now, if you're *not* going to go with my menu, here are two approaches to making your shopping list.

The Scientific Method

This is where you take out your menu, check your recipes, write down the ingredients, and then add them up.

For example: 3 loaves of bread + 2 sticks of butter + 2 packages of cheese + ½ tsp. of dry mustard + 5 cups of milk + 8 eggs = Egg and cheese strata. Add 12 eggs for hard boiling/dyeing = 20 eggs, and so on.

This is tedious, but accurate, and there's less of a chance you'll make a mistake, unless you're like me, who can go into a store with detailed written instructions and come out with only half the stuff. My mind wanders. That's why I don't drive a car.

The Zen Method (Recommended)

Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Pour yourself a glass of red. Now, *visualize* yourself making Easter dinner, writing down the ingredients as you go along. Needless to say, this is much more hit-or-miss than the previous method. But a lot more fun.

Either way, save a copy on your computer and you only have to do this once. One and done. I'm all about it.

Easter, Part 3—Holy Thursday

Hard Boiled Eggs

Today, Holy Thursday, my kitchen gets busy.

Not real busy, just a little busy. And this is the whole secret to cooking for a holiday.

By now, if you've been listening, you have:

1. Checked in with your guests.
2. Composed your menu.
3. Compiled your shopping list.
4. Shopped for the nonperishables.
5. Had at least two glasses of wine, in addition to your usual intake.

It may seem a little weird to start cooking on Thursday for a dinner on Sunday. It's not. I start my Thanksgiving cooking a month in advance (which you will find out soon enough). The less cooking you do on the holiday itself, the more time you have for cocktails.

So today I'm going to boil some eggs. And then put them in the fridge to be dyed tomorrow. And I will go to sleep tonight a happy woman because I know my Easter dinner is right on track.

This is for those of you who don't know how to boil eggs. You may think you know how to boil eggs. I thought *I* knew how to boil eggs. But my son burst that bubble, and taught me better.

Hard Boiled Eggs

1. Put some eggs, gently, in a single layer into a pot that you have a lid for. Cover them completely with cold water. Put the pot on the stove, without the lid, over medium heat.
2. Keep an eye on the eggs. When they start to boil rapidly (and this takes some time over medium heat, so be patient), turn off the heat and put the lid on the pot. Then set your timer— or watch your clock—for fifteen minutes. I use a timer or I'll forget. Hey, I'm busy. And old.
3. When the time is up, put the eggs in ice water. They'll peel easier that way. When the eggs are cool, they're done.

Some of them might crack. So what. You're going to dye them pretty colors, and nobody will care. And don't get fancy about coloring eggs, just follow the directions on the package of whatever Easter egg dye you buy. They'll look nice in a big bowl no matter what.

Now, here's my schedule for the next few days:

- Good Friday: Color eggs, make an Easter basket for my daughter (age: over 30), clean house, shop for the perishables.
- Holy Saturday: Make the strata, cover it in foil, put it in the fridge overnight, do my nails.
- Easter Sunday: Everything else.

You might feel like a schedule isn't necessary, like it can all wait for Sunday while you play Spider Solitaire. It's a temptation. But a little discipline now will save you an exponential amount of grief come Easter morning. Having a little discipline keeps you out of trouble.

If you're alive and in one piece, you know that by now.

Easter, Part 4—Holy Saturday

Egg and Cheese Strata

Holy Saturday. Make the strata tonight.

This looks like a real recipe because I got it from one of my husband's aunts, a sister of the second wife/non-Italian. That's why there's so much butter in it, which is not a bad thing where your taste buds are concerned. This dish is easy, it's cheap, it feeds a lot of people, and it's good. Really, *really* good. You prep the strata the night before and put it in the fridge overnight. Then you just throw it in the oven the next day.

Egg and Cheese Strata

3 loaves of cheap sliced bread, crusts trimmed

2 sticks of butter, softened

8 eggs, slightly beaten

5 cups of milk

8 cups (2 big packages) of shredded cheddar cheese

1 tsp. dry mustard (I don't know what this is for, but it's in the recipe. So I do it.)

1. Grease a large baking pan with butter. I like the huge cheap aluminum disposable roasting pans you get at the grocery store; they can be washed and reused if you're careful with them.
2. Place a layer of buttered bread at the bottom of the pan. Sprinkle with $\frac{1}{3}$ of the cheese. Stagger a second layer of buttered bread and sprinkle with another $\frac{1}{3}$ of the cheese. Stagger a third layer of buttered bread, no cheese this time.
3. Combine the eggs, milk, and mustard in a big bowl and pour it over everything. Press down with a fork.
4. *Now* you can top the strata with the rest of the cheese. Don't be stingy. Cover the strata with foil and put it in the fridge overnight. Then uncover it and bake in a 350°F oven about 50 minutes to an hour, or until browned and puffy.

Cut into squares. Die happy.

Easter, Part 5—Easter Sunday

Baked Ham

Roasted Potatoes and Onions

Asparagus with Brown Butter

Fruit Salad

It's Easter Sunday. This is all easy. You'll see.

Baked Ham

If you're making the fruit salad with maraschino cherries, save some of the juice and pour it over the ham before you put it in the oven. You'll get a nice, sweet flavor to the rind, *and* it will keep you from chugging the juice straight from the jar, which is what I do when nobody's looking.

Hell, you can do the same thing with the juice from the canned pineapple too. Cherries and pineapples are a great combo. I remember my grandmother laboriously pinning pineapple slices, with maraschino cherries in the middle, on the Easter ham with toothpicks. Like a mosaic, with spikes. I'm too lazy for that. It was pretty, though.

I'm doing the juice.

Cover the ham with foil. Bake at 350°F, 20 minutes per pound. Take the foil off for the last half hour of cooking. Done.

Roasted Potatoes and Onions

Potatoes

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

Rosemary (optional)

1. Spray one of those big disposable aluminum roasting pans with some nonstick spray. And/or grease it with olive oil.
2. Peel some potatoes, and cut them into pieces. As many potatoes as will fit in your pan, however big you like your pieces, the recipe's the same.
3. Drizzle the potatoes with about ½ cup of olive oil.
4. Now pay attention because here's the secret: Rub the olive oil on the potato pieces with your clean, bare hands. I don't know why it makes a difference, but it does. I'm

giving credit where it's due: Anthony taught me this.

5. Peel and cut up a big onion. Add the onion (with a *spoon* , for chrissakes, we're talking onions here) to the potatoes and add a little more olive oil.
6. Salt and pepper to taste. You can sprinkle with a little rosemary, if you like it. Put the pan in the 350°F oven with the ham.
7. Stir the potatoes around after they've been cooking for 10 minutes, then occasionally after that. Bake for about an hour, or until they start to brown and get a little crispy.

Asparagus with Brown Butter

This one is from Anthony's dad, the *famoso ristorante* owner.

Asparagus

Butter

1. Wash and break the ends off some asparagus, and then steam them over some salted water until they're bright green. Don't let them get too soft. Maybe 7 to 8 minutes.
2. In the meantime, put 2 sticks of butter in a small frying pan. Turn the heat on low under the butter and let it melt.
3. After the butter is melted, keep cooking it and skim off the white foamy stuff until you're left with a (mostly) clear liquid. Then, keep cooking until the liquid turns brown.
4. Pour it over the asparagus when you serve.

You won't believe how good this is.

Mrs. D's Fruit Salad

For the first seven years of Anthony's and my various relationship situations—dating, living in sin (sorry, Sister Arnoldine), married (but not “in the church”)—we had a roommate. No kidding. His name was Giulio and he was divorced from a nice Italian girl (infamia, but stuff happens). He was like the uncle who moves back home to save money, and he eventually got rich on the stock market and became a Republican. He was from Pittsburgh, and his sainted Italian mother was a genius in the cucina. This is her recipe.

Fruit

Whipping cream, 3 small containers

Sour cream, 1 small container

1. Take some fruit. Whatever you like. I use canned pineapple chunks and mandarin orange slices, fresh green grapes, and maraschino cherries (because I fucking love them). You can use what you want. But not bananas. They turn brown and get mushy.
2. Wash the fruit and cut it up (if it's fresh). Open jars and cans (if it's not). Put it all into a colander in the sink to drain out the liquid.
3. In a big bowl, whip 3 small containers of heavy whipping cream. It takes a little time for it to turn into real whipped cream, like twenty minutes or more, so don't give up. I recommend using an electric mixer, though I used to do it by hand with an eggbeater back in the days when I was more than a little stupid.
4. Once it's whipped, fold in a small container of sour cream with a rubber scraper. Mix with the fruit and chill, in both senses of the word.

Everything else on the menu, you can buy at the store. Don't overthink it. And you have now earned the ass-end of the lamb cake.

Buona Pasqua.

Easter—Bonus Recipe

Pizza Rustica

It's true that my Easter dinner menu is not long on Italian food. For that, there's Christmas, which will forever mean lasagna, as long as there is breath in my body. Lasagna with a sauce that would make baby Jesus cry. But since we eat Italian food just about every other day of the year, we allow for a little break from the ordinary on Easter and Thanksgiving. It became a tradition, and traditions are beautiful, strong, and terrifying, to be departed from only at great risk to your mental health.

For example...

One Thanksgiving, when I was pregnant with my first, we were invited to the home of my husband's Aunt Geraldine for dinner. Now, roast turkey is my favorite food in the world, hands down. Being pregnant, I had worked myself into an absolute turkey-craving *frenzy* during the weeks leading up to the holiday.

But when we got to Aunt Geraldine's...antipasto and manicotti. "I thought we would try something a little different," she said, completely unaware of the terrible sin she had committed. I was devastated. I locked myself in the bathroom and cried.

The next day, Anthony went to the butcher and literally begged him for a turkey (we were new at this whole "with child" thing, and I assure you that was the last time he ever did anything like that). I ate the whole goddamn bird. And I never trusted Thanksgiving to anyone else ever again.

Speaking of Aunt Geraldine, there is an Italian food that's traditional at Easter: *pizza rustica*. This is her recipe. My husband loves it. Were it up to Anthony, it would be the only thing we ate on Easter. However, Nicki isn't a fan, and she has become very attached to the Easter menu of her childhood. So I try to make a *pizza rustica* for St. Anthony's Day, June 13, which is my husband's birthday.

Aunt Geraldine called this pizza *italiana*, and this is her recipe straight from the three-by-five cards. Anthony calls it calzone. Whatever. It's worth the effort.

Pizza Rustica

Dough:

3 eggs
½ cup of olive oil
1 cup of milk
5 cups of flour
1 tsp. of salt
3 tsp. of baking powder

1. Beat the eggs, add the oil, and stir. Then add the milk.
2. In a separate bowl, stir the dry ingredients together, then add them—a little at a time—to the eggs. When it's all mixed (you may need to use your hands at the end), knead the dough for a minute or so, and then divide the ball into two smaller balls, one a little bigger than the other.
3. On a floured surface, roll out the bigger ball of dough about four inches larger than your baking pan. (Aunt Geraldine used a big pie plate, but I prefer a 9" x 13" pan.)
4. Grease the pan, and line the bottom and sides with the rolled-out dough.

Filling:

2½ lb. of loose Italian sausage, the hot stuff
2½ lb. of ricotta
5 eggs
½ cup of grated Romano cheese
Fresh Italian parsley, chopped fine
Salt and pepper, to taste

1. Bake or fry the sausage, breaking it up with a fork. Let cool.
2. Beat the ricotta with 4 of the eggs and the rest of the ingredients. Mix the sausage with the ricotta. Spread the mixture on the bottom layer of dough.
3. Roll out the other layer of dough and place on top.
4. If you like, you can flute the dough by pinching the top and bottom together every inch or so. Prick the top crust a few times with a fork and then brush it with the beaten yolk of the last egg.
5. Bake at 350°F for 50 minutes to an hour or until golden brown.

Aunt Geraldine served this cold. That's the way we eat it, too.

And if, by the smallest chance imaginable, your marinara sauce doesn't result in a marriage proposal from your heart's desire, try a pizza rustica.

If that doesn't work, he's an idiot. Move on.

We Live and Learn

Easter Recap

Here's how my Easter went for me:

1. The strata: I used two loaves of bread and that barely covered it. Next year, I'm going to buy three loaves of bread. I'll give what's left over to the birds. I've already changed the shopping list and the recipe for you, so if you had a different experience and went back to check, no, you're not crazy. Well, maybe you are, but this isn't one of the symptoms.
2. The potatoes could have cooked longer. The package directions on the ham said to put it in at 300°F, which I did. What the package directions didn't know was that the ham had to share the oven with the potatoes, and potatoes take a *long* fucking time to cook at 300°F. Next year, I'm going to cook everything at 350°F.
3. The biggest problem I always have is the oven logistics. I have an oven and a microwave. I *hate* cooking anything in the microwave, so it's always a challenge to coordinate cooking times for all the stuff that has to go in the oven. When I first moved in with Anthony, we had a stove with a second little oven on top of it. That was great. It could be the reason why I married him.
4. It took *forever* to whip the cream. Like forty-five minutes. Maybe because I was using fancy organic heavy whipping cream, which—truthfully—didn't look all that heavy to me. I'm not saying it wasn't worth it, I'm just saying that today my wrist hurts.
5. The stab wound produced no bloodshed and therefore did not require medical attention.

For once, I didn't do it to myself. I'm a great one for self-injury doing normal, everyday activities that everybody else has no problem with. I fall down a lot. I don't wear high heels unless someone is driving me door-to-door. I once tore a ligament in my rib cage pulling on my tights. You might think I'm kidding when I

say that I don't drink while I cook. Actually I do—sometimes a little wine. But I'm very careful to wait until I'm done working with sharp objects. What I *hadn't* considered, until yesterday, was that I should probably wait until *everybody else* is done working with sharp objects because I may need to defend myself.

Here's what happened: Dinner was ready, and all our guests were sitting down *a tavola* in the dining room. Anthony was in the kitchen, with his back to me. I'm walking through the kitchen, to join our guests, when—suddenly—Anthony turns around and *whoosh!* I get a butcher knife in the thigh. I told you this man was passive-aggressive. Well, apparently, he's graduated.

There was a collective gasp from the dining room. "Are you all right?" Anthony asked, for once worried about something besides the temperature of his soup. Well, not ever having been stabbed before, I couldn't tell. "Oh, yeah, fine," I answered, and then thought better of it. I have a high threshold of pain.

"Are you sure?" Anthony asked again, showing depth of concern.

"Uh...maybe. I'll be back in a minute." I rushed into the bedroom to check for blood. And to make sure my skirt was all right. No punctures. The skirt would live to see another Easter. Lucky for Anthony—a good skirt is hard to come by.

Back to the food. No meal is ever perfect, and every time you cook you're gonna learn something, and maybe make a little tweak. That's how recipes evolve and how they eventually become your own.

It's like your kid's piano recital, you know? The kid notices the mistakes; *you* notice the mistakes, but nobody else does. Really.

Cooking, math, geography. People think these are esoteric mysteries. If you demonstrate the smallest ability in any of them, everyone thinks you're a genius.

Even if the potatoes are a little undercooked.

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving, Part 1—On Your Mark

I've been a little distracted lately, but now the clothes dryer is fixed, and I'm back in action. I have bad karma with major appliances. I've had the stove go down on Easter and the fridge die on Christmas Eve. It must be punishment for *something* and, to be honest, I've racked up a lot of somethings in my life to be punished for. Like all the times I made cheesecake with Cool Whip.

Last Monday was Columbus Day, * and that means Thanksgiving is coming. My favorite holiday because it's all about the food. You might think I'm pushing things, but my Thanksgiving dinner is *famosa* . And for *famosa*, you gotta start early.

So, this week I bought my pumpkins. Which means this week is when *you* need to go out and buy *your* pumpkins, or you'll get behind schedule. I'm not telling you to *do* anything with the pumpkins. That's coming. This is more of a prelude to the holiday season. I don't really celebrate Halloween, aside from giving candy bars to cute little kids. Any holiday that includes spiders as décor should be ignored as much as possible.

Anyway, all you have to do buy the pumpkins. You'll be cooking them right after the spiders go away. The pumpkin puree freezes well, and you'll have it for the whole winter. In the meantime, the pumpkins look nice on the doorstep, if the squirrels don't get at them. Put the pumpkins on the *front* doorstep because, for some reason, squirrels don't like coming to the front door. (My editor says, "Maybe because they're not tall enough to reach the doorbell?")

Now, what kind of pumpkins? This year, I bought two *big* ones, after checking out the pie pumpkins, which were cute but dinky. For the amount of pumpkin puree I want, I would have to cook six of the dinky ones, at least. Yes, theoretically, you can cook one small pumpkin and have enough for a pie. A pie. *One* pie. *Una*. But what about pumpkin soup and seeds and bread and cheesecake and cookies—all saviors of the soul during a long, dark winter?

Just do me a favor and go buy some pumpkins. Any size. In the long run, it won't matter. For the moment, let's focus only on the Thanksgiving pie. If you're doing the pie pumpkins, get one per pie. You need two cups of pumpkin puree for a nice, big pie.

Having bought my pumpkins, I felt entitled to a reward. So, last

night Anthony and I met up with Anthony's brother Stefano and his wife Jill for dinner. Stefano chose a Chinese restaurant. A *good* Chinese restaurant. With a bar. Case closed. Let's go.

Then, after a martini and an eggroll, my sister-in-law turned to me and asked, "Do you have any contact with the family?"

A simple enough question, which I answered without hesitating.

"Well, I see Johnny over at Mariano's once in a while..."

I was interrupted by Stefano, who said, "That's not what she means." Not what she means? Was I missing something? What's in a Chinese martini? Sometimes, it only takes one martini to render me incapable of understanding my own mother tongue.

It turns out that when my sister-in-law says "contact with the family" she means visits from the spirits of the dead.

Oh. Okay. Of course.

I don't know why I was surprised because this kind of thing happens with Italians all the time and is a common topic of conversation. It's important to keep the tone light. Bonus points if the story involves twins. Triple bonus if you can tell it in Italian so you don't scare the children.

However, in my opinion, conversations like these are better kept for holiday evenings, in the kitchen after cleanup, with the candles lit, the guys watching the game, and one too many Gallianos. Or later, with a second piece of pie and coffee.

Pumpkin pie. Get moving.

* Now Indigenous Peoples Day. And it's about frickin' time.

Thanksgiving, Part 2—Get Set

Pumpkin Puree

In the United States of America, Thanksgiving falls on the fourth Thursday of November. If that's confusing, take heart in knowing that someday Thanksgiving will be moved to a convenient nearby Monday, to take the mystery out of whether your *stoona*hd of a boss is going to let you have a four-day weekend or not.

I don't want to insult your intelligence, but I'm not taking any chances. Every November I have to tell my husband when Thanksgiving is. And he's always surprised, though he can tell it's coming because I start cooking for Thanksgiving four weeks in advance.

"But Connie," you might ask, "what kind of an idiot starts cooking Thanksgiving dinner four weeks ahead of time?"

This kind of idiot. Right here. In fact, I recommend getting started on your first day off after Halloween, so you can use your Halloween pumpkins (if the squirrels didn't get them) while they're still good. And starting four weeks ahead of time is psychologically important because it makes me feel like I'm getting a jump on the holidays instead of letting them sneak up on me. Which keeps the panic attacks to a minimum.

Look, it's a *big* freaking meal. And I'm busy because Christmas is coming, too, and that's even more work. You gotta take it slow, or you'll be a fucking basket case by December 25. One small (but brilliant) step at a time. The whole point of all this cooking-for-a-holiday advice is to show how to do holidays with as little *agita* as possible because, you know, you might actually want to enjoy them.

So that means starting ahead of time. Remember those pumpkins I told you to buy?

Go get them.

You're also going to need a large cutting board, a couple of huge baking pans, and a big-ass pointy knife.

1. First, wash the pumpkins. Not with soap, because that could result in some unfortunate consequences. Just scrub them with water, and roll up your sleeves.

2. Lay a pumpkin on its side and cut it in half, widthwise, along the equator. This is the hard part, and the first cut is the hardest because the damn thing keeps rolling around. Start by sticking the knife in slowly and *carefully* . Then, gradually wiggle it all way around. The pumpkin just sort of breaks in two after a while.
3. Now, scrape the stringy innards out of the pumpkin halves. If you've got kids, or a husband who's got nothing better to do, they can separate the seeds out of the stringy stuff. You can toast them (the seeds, not the kids or the husband) in the oven with a little salt. I'm not doing that this year because the kids are grown and gone, and Anthony wants to watch the game. Any game. I get the message.
4. Preheat your oven to 325°F. Line your baking pans with foil and spray the foil with some nonstick stuff. If you want to skip the foil and be "green," go for it. But don't say I didn't warn you.
5. Put your pumpkin shells, skin side up, on the baking pans. If they don't fit, cut them into smaller pieces. Put the shells in the oven and cook the hell out of them. About an hour or so. They're done when they feel soft when you stick a fork in, and they kind of collapse.
6. Take the pumpkin out of the oven and set it aside to cool. The pumpkin's cool? Way to go. Almost there.
7. Get the largest bowl in your kitchen and a big spoon. Scrape the cooked pumpkin away from the skin, into the bowl.
8. Now, take a potato masher and smash the cooked pumpkin, fishing out any pieces of pumpkin skin you find. I mean, really smash it. Take your time. Get it as smooth as possible. This is good exercise and good therapy. Sure, you could use a blender or a food processor but, personally, I like to smash things.

Last step:

1. Gather a bunch of little containers with lids. Tupperware, Rubbermaid, the little plastic containers left over from the ricotta, whatever. Measure out two cups of pumpkin into

each container, and put them in the freezer. Most recipes (a pie, for instance) use two cups of pumpkin, so you won't have to measure again. And if you cook big pumpkins, you'll have plenty left over for winter treats.

This year I got eleven cups of pumpkin for my efforts. That made four containers of two cups each, and one container with three cups, which I'll use for soup.

And, damn, am I proud of myself.

A word of warning: Home-cooked fresh pumpkin looks different from the stuff in the cans. It's gold, not orange, for starters. And your Thanksgiving pie will have a different texture, lighter and less dense (in a word, *perfetto*). If you've got some family members who are absolutely addicted to the recipe on the back of the Libby's can, the one with the (insert shudder here) evaporated milk, be aware you're going to get some pushback.

That's fine. They can go have Thanksgiving at McDonald's.

Thanksgiving, Part 3—The Menu

Just so you know what you cooked all that pumpkin for, here's the menu:

Connie Staccato's Famosa Thanksgiving Dinner

Roast Turkey

Grandma's Stuffing

Gravy (for the bird, not what the *Napolitan*' mean by gravy)

Mashed Potatoes

Sweet Potato Casserole

Succotash

Cranberry Sauce

Pecan Pie

Pumpkin Pie

Whipped Cream

Coffee

Wine

Sambuca, Galliano, whiskey, etc.

That's what *we're* having. You can have whatever you want. My shopping lists and recipes are provided.

I don't do appetizers, because people usually want to bring stuff, and appetizers are a good thing for them to bring. I don't have the patience for appetizers, and Lord knows with all this food you don't really need one, although Nino once made a really nice thing with figs and goat cheese and honey that I wouldn't mind if he made again. Last year we had popcorn, and that worked, sort of in keeping with the theme of the day. But on most occasions, the anchovy-stuffed olive from my martini is appetizer enough for me.

Speaking of martinis: I think it only fair to warn you, yet again, that if you're the cook, you should save the drinking for later. Vodka doesn't mix well with knives. Especially if you're Italian. If you remember, Anthony once stabbed me in the leg with a carving knife, and he wasn't even drinking. True story. It was an accident.

So he says.

Thanksgiving, Part 4—Go! The Shopping List

It's time to go shopping.

The guilt-free, go-to-the-grocery-store shopping that Italian husbands are enthusiastically in favor of. My Thanksgiving shopping list is saved on the computer like the ones for the other holidays. I was going to divide the list into two parts for you, perishables and nonperishables, but I'm going to assume that you're smart enough to figure that out on your own. If you're *not* smart enough to know that you shouldn't buy the fresh parsley three weeks before you make the stuffing, you need more help than I can give you here. Call your mom and ask her advice. She'll be thrilled.

So print your list, start buying the stuff as soon as it's reasonable, and check things off as you go along.

Thanksgiving Shopping List

- Turkey—Order a fresh one at least two weeks ahead. (To be honest, if it were up to me, I would just buy an assortment of turkey legs, wings, and thighs, and skip the whole carving routine. I don't really feel the need to channel Norman Rockwell, but Anthony is sentimental.)
- Turkey gravy, 8 packages of the instant stuff (for your leftovers; no, you are *not* going to serve this on Thanksgiving)
- Chicken broth, 2 cans
- Large foil roasting pans, 2 (for the bird, doubled up)
- Medium size foil roasting pan (for the sweet potatoes)
- Small square foil cake pans, 6 (for the stuffing)
- Cheap sliced bread, 3 large packages
- Onions, 2 large
- Celery, 1 bunch
- Parsley, 1 bunch, Italian flat leaf
- Unbleached white flour, the big bag
- Canned pumpkin, 1 can, 15 oz. size (in case you didn't cook your own)
- Chopped pecans, 1 large bag
- Light corn syrup, 1 bottle

- White sugar, 1 bag
- Brown sugar, 1 package (you're not going to use much)
- Baking potatoes, 8 to 10 (more, if you're feeding an army)
- Sweet potatoes, 3
- Lemons, 2
- Marshmallows, 1 bag
- Baby lima beans, frozen, 1 large bag
- Corn, frozen, 1 large bag
- Cranberries, 3 bags, 12 oz. size
- Raspberries, frozen, 1 package
- Whipping cream, 6 half pints
- Butter, 4 lb.
- Whole milk, 1 quart
- Half and half, enough for all the coffee
- Eggs, 1 dozen
- Wine, whiskey, Galliano, whatever (I buy this last, or I wouldn't get anything done)

I bought all my nonperishables last week. Good thing, because I had oral surgery yesterday. Yes, another one. A gingivectomy this time. If you don't know what a gingivectomy is, count yourself lucky. After the surgery I was flat on my back all day, cursing the woman who gave birth to my periodontist, and today the right side of my jaw is swollen to the size of a grapefruit. Which might cause people to wonder if Anthony decked me, though people who know us wouldn't think that for a minute because *his* face is still intact.

Oral surgery or no, I'm still on schedule. And that's how it should be.

Thanksgiving, Part 5—Two Weeks Before

Pie Crust

Okay, let's do a recap. Thanksgiving is thirteen days away. So far:

1. The menu is planned.
2. The nonperishables have been bought.
3. The pumpkin is cooked.
4. The turkey is on order.

And today I'm making pie crust. Not rolling it out, just making the dough. It's easy. I promise. Why would I lie?

Apologies in advance: I should have told you to buy a pastry cutter, but I didn't. If you don't know what a pastry cutter is, forget about it, it's not strictly necessary. You can get the same result using two butter knives and criss-cross cutting the butter into the flour. And just to show you what kind of person I am, I'm going to use the butter knives, too, in solidarity. Pastry cutters are a pain in the butt to clean anyway, and cutting stuff up with knives is always a good time.

I used to use the all-purpose pie crust recipe from the *Joy of Cooking*. Then, last year, I stumbled on the fucking *holy grail* of pie crusts: the King Arthur Flour All-Butter Pie Crust recipe, and, damn, I am *never* going back.

You could just google this recipe, but I'll give it to you here. It looks a little bizarre—sixteen tablespoons of butter—but trust me. It rolls out like a dream and tastes like heaven. I consider finding this recipe (thank you, St. Anthony!) one of the high points of my life.

Pie Crust (makes 2 single-crust pies, or 1 double-crust)

2½ cups of unbleached, all-purpose flour

1 tsp. of salt

16 Tbsp. of cold butter

¼ to ½ cup of ice water

Now, here's what you do:

1. Put the flour in a big bowl. Stir in the salt.

2. Cut the butter into little pieces and put them in the flour. Work the butter into the flour (using a pastry cutter, two butter knives, your fingers, whatever) until it's all crumbly.
3. When you've got a bowl full of crumbly butter and flour, sprinkle the water all over it. Start with the $\frac{1}{4}$ cup and use more if you need to. I usually end up using the whole $\frac{1}{2}$ cup.
4. Now, take your rings off and start playing with the dough, just until you can gather it up into a ball. Knead it a few times. If it doesn't come together right away, add a *little* more water and keep smooshing. It'll happen.
5. As soon as you can get your ball to hold together, stop kneading the dough and form it into 2 disks. That way, you're halfway there when you roll them out for the pies.

I got the disk idea from my friend Babs, who is *way* smarter than I am. It's to my advantage that I can freely admit that. The Connie Staccato Philosophy of Life says that having a smart friend takes the pressure off of having to be smart yourself. My genius lies elsewhere. Like, I help Babs with her fashion choices, an area of life where Italy will always trump Norway.

Wrap the disks individually in plastic wrap, and store them in a container in the fridge. They'll be fine in there for about two weeks or until you're ready to bake your pies, whichever comes first. You can freeze them, too, no worries.

When you're ready to use the dough, take it out of the fridge and let it warm up at room temperature until it behaves. This recipe should cover two nine-inch, deep dish pies. Don't make small pies. There's no point.

That's it for today. I've got other things to do. Like have a glass of wine, which I richly deserve, because I am a righteous, Thanksgiving-dinner-cooking sister.

Thanksgiving, Part 6—The Schedule

At this point, the pumpkin is cooked, pureed, and waiting in the freezer. Half the shopping has been done. The pie crust dough is in the fridge. The turkey is on order. Starting next Saturday, the pace picks up, and that means we need a schedule. Seriously, write it down on your calendar. It will give you a sense of control.

The Schedule:

- **Saturday** before Thanksgiving: Shop for the perishable ingredients and everything else on the shopping list you haven't already bought.
- **Sunday** before Thanksgiving: Make the cranberry sauce. Chop up the bread for the stuffing. Move a container of pumpkin from the freezer to the fridge to defrost.
- **Monday** before Thanksgiving: Roll out pie crusts and line the pie plates with them.
- **Tuesday** before Thanksgiving: Bake the pies.
- **Thanksgiving Eve** : Pick up the turkey from the butcher. Prepare the vegetables for the stuffing. Prepare the sweet potato casserole.

Don't worry, I'll tell you how to do all this stuff. Now, if you do it according to the schedule, here's what you have left to do on Thanksgiving Day:

- Put the bird in the oven. (No sweat.)
- Assemble the stuffing and bake it. (It's already half done.)
- Make the mashed potatoes. (Get somebody else to do this.)
- Make the succotash. (Frozen vegetables in disguise.)
- Make the gravy. (Have a glass of wine.)
- Bake the sweet potatoes. (All ready to go.)
- Whip the cream for the pies. (After dinner, while enjoying a nice Sambuca.)
- Make coffee.

Yeah, there's a few things to do, but you should be on cruise

control. I don't even have a lot of clean up at the end of the day on Thanksgiving, because I bake most of everything in foil pans that go right from the oven to the table and then into the fridge after dinner. I don't give a damn about how my table looks. If you're looking at my dishes instead of my food, you're missing the point, and I'm gonna guess that happens a lot.

Anthony does the dishes (at halftime) since he won't buy me a dishwasher. Well, he would, if I really pressed the point, but he would view it as a moral weakness. I kid you not. If we ever meet up for a drink, I'll tell you the story about the electric can opener.

Thanksgiving, Part 7—Four Days Before

Cranberry Sauce *Bread for Stuffing*

Today, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, begins the real work. I'm going to make the cranberry sauce, and while that's cooking, I'm going to chop up the bread for the turkey stuffing.

I switched up the schedule and finished all my shopping on Friday this year, and good thing I did. Because yesterday, in addition to *finally* getting the stitches removed from my latest oral surgery, we got hit by the biggest November snowstorm in 120 years.

That made yesterday a bad day for shopping, so lucky I did it on Friday. In Chicago, it's important to watch the weather and adjust accordingly. Because in Chicago, on any given day of the year, you could have a snowstorm, or you could be wearing shorts. However, I am *ready*. In theory I shouldn't have to leave the house until December 1, at the earliest. Which is fine by me. Everything I need is at my fingertips, including the whiskey.

Cranberry Sauce

Water

Sugar

Cranberries, 3 bags, 12 oz. size

Frozen raspberries, 1 bag

1. Put 2½ cups of sugar and 3 cups of water in a big pot. Cook and stir the sugar water over medium high heat until it goes from cloudy to clear. Then bring it to a boil. Turn down the heat and let it simmer for 10 minutes.
2. Rinse 3 bags of fresh cranberries (remove the really deformed ones and any sticks/twigs/spiders you might find) and put them in the pot with the water. Bring to a boil and turn down to a simmer again. Cook the cranberries for about 45 minutes, uncovered, which is 4 times longer than any other recipe will tell you. Stir it now and then. The sauce thickens up, but don't wait for it to turn into jelly, like the canned stuff, because it won't.

3. Now, turn off the heat and stir in a big bag of frozen raspberries. Ladle the sauce into some containers, let cool, cover the containers, and put them in the fridge until Thanksgiving.

While the cranberry sauce is cooking, you can chop up your stuffing bread. I chop up three big loaves of cheap sliced bread into one-inch cubes. More or less. Depends on my mood.

I'm going to give you two options on how to do the bread:

- Option 1: You can cut the bread up into cubes and toast the cubes in the oven. Then tie them up in plastic bags and set aside until Thanksgiving morning. I usually don't do this. It's boring. And just one more thing to go wrong.
- Option 2: This is what I do. I get two pristine brown paper bags from the grocery store. I put my cut-up bread into one of them and put the other bag over the top of the first one. Like a condom. Then, once or twice a day, I go into the bag and toss the bread around a bit with my hands. The paper bags let enough air in so the bread gets nice and stale (which is what you want) by Thanksgiving morning without going moldy.

Your choice. Anthony has brought it to my attention that people who live in the American Midwest (which includes us) have taken to chopping up White Castle sliders and using them, instead of bread, for their turkey stuffing. I had never heard of this, but I confess that after an initial wave of revulsion, it occurred to me that it would taste good.

One more thing. If you cooked and froze your pumpkin in two-cup containers, take one of them down and put it in the fridge. Pie baking is Tuesday. It should be defrosted by then. Me, too, I hope.

Thanksgiving, Part 8—Three Days Before

Pie Shells

Today I'm going to do one thing. I'm going to roll out the pie crusts with the dough I made a week and a half ago and line my pie plates.

First thing this morning, I took the dough out of the fridge. The dough needs to be at, or near, room temperature. This takes about an hour. Two hours, if it's been frozen

The next thing I did was pull out the two new nine-inch, deep dish pie plates I bought at Mariano's for ten dollars each, which was a quarter of the price that I saw them going for at the fancy kitchen store. Pretty much the same dish, so why so cheap? I'll tell you why. Because I just spent a half an hour peeling off all the labels and price tags that were glued on like they were intended to survive a zombie apocalypse.

(Never mind, idiot girl just figured out that the glue holding the labels onto the plates was water-soluble. Too late for my nails, though.)

Now, for those of you who hyperventilate at the thought of rolling out a pie crust, relax. I've got some secrets:

- Secret #1: I never put a crust on the *top* of my pies. I don't have the patience. Fortunately, I make pumpkin pie and pecan pie for Thanksgiving, and neither of them needs a crust on top. My apple pie has a crumble topping, and that's the extent of my pie repertoire. So, the only visible part of my pie crust is the rim. Really, nobody is going to see the mistakes; they will only taste the wonderful.
- Secret #2: The King Arthur All-Butter Pie Crust. If you made this per my recommendation (and you should listen to me), rolling out the dough is the easiest thing you're ever gonna do in your life.

You need a rolling pin. If you don't have a rolling pin, you can use a wine bottle. If you don't have a wine bottle, we're not friends. Stop reading this and go away.

Sprinkle some flour on a big cutting board and rub some on the rolling pin. Place a disk of dough on the floured surface and sprinkle some more flour on top of it.

Now you're ready. Working in *one* direction, from the center of the disk outward, go around forming it into a big circle with your rolling pin. Don't roll back-and-forth. Sprinkle with more flour, if the dough gets sticky. Roll it out as thin as you can get it. You'll be using a fifteen-inch circle of the dough, more or less.

Loosely roll up the dough circle around your rolling pin and carefully unroll it on top of the pie plate. Help it sink in a bit. Then, put some flour on your fingers and push the dough down in the plate, and against the sides and the rim. If you get any tears or holes, take little pieces of your overflow dough and patch them. Nobody will be the wiser.

Dip a fork into flour and score the dough around the rim. Keep dipping and scoring all the way around. It looks pretty and helps to keep the dough from shrinking into the pie plate while it's baking. Now take a sharp knife and trim off any excess dough, which you can put in the freezer for future use. Repeat the process for the second pie. Wrap the plates in plastic wrap and put them in the fridge.

Ecco ! That's it. Now you have pie shells. Aren't they gorgeous? Could Martha Stewart do better? Well, yeah, probably. But I could crochet a better poncho.

Thanksgiving, Part 9—Two Days Before

Pecan Pie

Pumpkin Pie

Today I bake pies, which makes me feel like the Queen of the Whole Wide World. When those beauties are cooling on the kitchen table, my husband remembers why he married me.

And the best part of all is that—since the pie shells are ready to go—it's no big effort. Easy as pie, capeesh? That's for real.

I start with the pecan pie and then do the pumpkin because of the temperature of the oven. The pecan bakes at 375°F. The pumpkin starts at 425°F and then goes down to 350°F. Do the math.

I got the pecan pie recipe from the back of a bag of pecans. It looked weird, and in my experience, recipes that look weird are usually great. This pie is creamy, like the inside of a Caramello bar, and it's a fucking masterpiece.

Pecan Pie

1½ cups of light corn syrup
½ cup of sugar
¼ cup (half a stick) of butter
1 cup of chopped pecans
3 slightly beaten eggs
1 tsp. of vanilla
Dash of salt
Pie shell

1. Put the corn syrup, sugar, and butter in a saucepan and bring it to a boil on top of the stove.
2. Turn down the heat and boil *gently* for 5 minutes, stirring it once in a while.
3. Take the syrup mixture off the heat and set it aside somewhere, uncovered, to cool down a little, maybe half an hour. It will form a skin on top, but don't worry. Just stir it.
4. In the meantime, put the chopped pecans into the pie shell.
5. Now, in a separate bowl, combine the eggs, vanilla, and

salt.

6. When the syrup is cool enough (so it doesn't start cooking the eggs), stir it *gradually* into the egg mixture, beating well as you go.
7. Pour all of this stuff over the pecans.
8. Bake in a 375°F oven for 30 to 35 minutes. Or until the pie isn't totally soupy when you jiggle it. Use your judgment. But don't overbake. Keep in mind that it'll settle down some when it cools off.

During that 35 minutes, you can get your pumpkin pie ready for the oven.

Pumpkin Pie

I use the recipe from the *Joy of Cooking* with no deviations. Go out and buy a copy (you should have one anyway), or find the recipe on the internet because I'm pretty sure it's not legal for me to print it here. And I'm also guessing that my chances of getting their permission to print one of their recipes in *Connie Staccato Cooks Mafia Favorites* are slim to none. If you don't want to buy the book or you can't find the recipe on the internet, just write to me and I'll send it to you. Promise. It's the best pumpkin pie recipe out there, with no bullshit ingredients like chocolate, cranberries, cream cheese, or milk from a can. It's just straight-up incredible pumpkin pie and, trust me, it doesn't get better than this.

A word of warning, though. Many years ago, I gave this same advice to my brother's (ex-, thank God) wife and she went out and bought the *Joy of Cooking*. Then she called me up and yelled at me because her pie was a disaster. (She thought I was trying to sabotage her, silly woman, not taking into account that I had many, many better things to do.) Upon scrutiny, it turned out that the recipe in *her* book left out the very critical step of actually *baking* the pie. I think she put the raw pie in the fridge and waited for it to firm up. And, yeah, that would be a disaster. And against the laws of physics. True story. She had bought the book for super cheap at a Sam's Club, and that's just more evidence for the very important life lesson that you get what you pay for. So if you buy a second-hand copy of the *Joy of Cooking*, be aware that those editions are out there. If you happen to get one, give it to your brother's ex-wife for Christmas.

Once your pies are baked, put them in a safe place (away from your pets) to cool. then wrap them up in plastic, and put them in the fridge. On Thanksgiving, serve the pies with the whipped cream that you're going to whip after dinner. Better yet, have your *kids* (if applicable) whip the cream since it is an easy, but boring, job and can take up to a half hour. Or more, depending on your karma.

This is a good reason to have kids, if you can't think of any other.

Thanksgiving, Part 10—The Night Before

Vegetables for Stuffing

Sweet Potato Casserole

The pizza is on the way, and Nino's making hot toddies for dessert. It's holiday time! Holidays begin on the "eve" and end with the leftovers.

Today I prepped the vegetables for the stuffing and made the sweet potato casserole. Here are the instructions:

Vegetables for Stuffing

Onions, 2 big ones, you ultimately want 4 cups

Celery, 1 bunch, you also want 4 cups

Butter, 1 stick

1. Trim, wash, and chop the celery. Fry it in ½ stick of butter until a little soft. Transfer to a big bowl.
2. Chop the onions. Fry them in another ½ stick of butter until soft and a little brown. Put them in the bowl with the celery. Mix everything up, let cool, and then put it all in a container with a tight lid.

Store in the fridge until tomorrow, when the mixture will become *buoni amici* with the bread you've got chopped up for stuffing.

By the way, do *not*, under *any* circumstances, skip the step of frying the vegetables in butter before putting them in the fridge overnight. Trust me, I learned this the hard way. One year I just chopped the veggies and put them in the fridge without frying. Three words: Onion. Flavored. Milk. It happened.

Sweet Potato Casserole

Sweet potatoes, 3

Butter

Lemons

Brown sugar

Salt

Marshmallows (if your kids want)

1. Peel 3 big sweet potatoes. Cut into thin (¼-inch or so)

slices. Or you can buy them already peeled and sliced now, which means civilization is still making progress, but you need a lot, and they're expensive.

2. Butter a 9" x 13" baking dish or aluminum pan.
3. Put a layer of sweet potato slices in the pan and sprinkle with lemon juice, salt, and brown sugar. Dot with butter.
4. Repeat until the pan is full and/or you run out of sweet potatoes. I usually get 3 layers out of it.

Cover casserole with foil and put in the refrigerator. You'll bake it tomorrow, and that's when you'll use the marshmallows.

Now, go eat your pizza and get your beauty sleep.

The moment of glory is at hand.

Thanksgiving, Part 11—Connie Staccato Stuffs a Turkey

Stuffing

Roast Turkey

Mashed potatoes

Succotash

Gravy

Sweet Potatoes

Whipped cream

The secret to stuffing a turkey is—ha!—you don't. Listen to me, I know of which I speak. Stuffing a turkey is a *pain in the ass*. On many levels. To begin with, you have to stuff the thing, no big deal in and of itself, but here are the rules:

1. You have to put the turkey in the oven *immediately* after stuffing it.
2. You have to *unstuff* it before you eat, but not *too long* before you eat.
3. You have to hop up from the table right after the last spoonful of cranberry sauce passes your lips and put the turkey in the fridge before the nasty bird microbes start to interact with the vestiges of the nasty egg microbes that were in the stuffing. Because *that's* what's going to kill you when the turkey gets near room temperature.

I like to keep things simple, so I avoid the little microbe bastards altogether and bake the stuffing on the side in those little foil cake pans, the square ones that come three to a package. That way, you can eat a few pans at Thanksgiving dinner and freeze the rest. If you're seeking to avoid seasonal blimpdom, you can send any uneaten pans of stuffing home with your guests, no repackaging required. For the record, I am in *no way* above *serving* the stuffing in those foil pans, because—in my opinion—it's all about the food. Not that I don't appreciate the sight of a lovely table but, once you start eating, who the hell cares? If you do, lie to me.

This recipe is from my Sicilian American grandmother who—in a show of patriotism—always allowed space for a turkey and trimmings alongside the lasagna at Thanksgiving. I have modified it in two ways:

1. I have cut the recipe down by two-thirds, size-wise. Triple it if you're feeding three rooms full of an extended Sicilian family. You know, the inner-circle table and the outer-circle table and the kids' table. Geographically arranged to allow for maximum yelling.
2. I leave out the sage at the request of my husband. This a Sicilian woman always does: She cooks according to the tastes of her husband (even if he wouldn't know a sage leaf if it jumped up and bit him on the ass). She understands why he married her. Digressions from this tradition are few and far between, even to accommodate small children, who can eat *pane e burro* , if they're not brave enough to try the pasta *peccil* . And everybody's happy.

The following recipe will stand up to just about anything. Feel free to add sage without fear of repercussions. Or oysters, or cranberries, or quail beaks. Whatever floats your boat. Just remember that if you do, you're on your own.

Thanksgiving Day Stuffing

3 large loaves of cheap sliced bread, cut into 1-inch (or so) cubes, toasted or stale

4 cups of celery, chopped and cooked in butter

4 cups of onions, chopped and cooked in butter

1/2 cup of fresh parsley, chopped fine

3 sticks of butter, melted

3 eggs

1 Tbsp. salt

1 Tbsp. black pepper

1 Tbsp. of sage (I don't put this in. See explanation above.)

1. On Thanksgiving morning, put your stale bread cubes in the biggest pot you have. Run some cold water over it, until the bread is thoroughly wet, and press it down with your hands. Add more water, if necessary, and keep pressing until your bread is about the consistency of

crumbly paste. It's a good idea to take your rings off before you do this. And make sure you *pour off* any excess water. (**Author's note:** This section has been modified, on account of my son Nino, because he once tried to make stuffing, added *way* too much water, didn't pour off the excess, and—of course—he blamed me.)

2. Add the onions and celery that you cooked last night.
3. Right there in the pot, add all the other ingredients to the bread. Mix *well* with a big spoon. This takes some muscle. When you're done, you'll have worked off your first piece of pie.
4. Divide the stuffing into square cake pans. You should get 4 to 6 of them.
5. Cover the pans with foil and put them in the fridge until they're ready to be baked.
6. An hour before the turkey is done, uncover the stuffing and bake until browned, about an hour. Bake as many pans as will fit in the oven with everything else. If you can't fit in all the pans, bake the rest while you're eating.

Roast Turkey

As far as the (unstuffed) turkey goes, just put it in a big roasting pan, cover it loosely with foil (make a "tent"), and roast it in a 350°F oven until it's done, about 20 minutes a pound. Take the foil off for the last 45 minutes, so the turkey gets brown. Baste it occasionally and reserve any extra juice for the gravy.

For a big, fresh turkey that should take about 6 to 7 hours, but ask the guy at the meat counter. If you want to take the guesswork totally out of it, stick a meat thermometer into the thigh, and the turkey's done when the thermometer says 180 degrees. The science know-it-alls say we don't even have to wash a turkey anymore. Okay with me.

You also want to check for—and remove—any feathers, and *don't forget* to take out the neck and gizzards. For the uninitiated, you'll find the neck and gizzards (and heart and liver) of the turkey stuffed somewhere inside the bird. Usually in a plastic bag, so you *really* don't want to forget about them. Just take these body parts out of the plastic and throw them in to roast with the turkey because even though they sound disgusting, they taste good.

Assuming you've been following me closely and doing everything I've told you, here are the only things you have left to do, while the turkey is roasting:

1. Make the mashed potatoes.
2. Make the succotash.
3. Make the gravy.
4. Bake the sweet potatoes.
5. Whip the cream for the pies.

And here are the recipes:

Mashed Potatoes

Potatoes

Butter

Milk

Salt

Peel and wash 8 to 10 baking potatoes. Cut into quarters and put them in a big pot of water. Boil until soft. Drain and smash them up a bit. Add 1 cup of hot milk, ½ stick of melted butter, and 1 Tbsp. of salt. Beat with an electric beater until smooth. This is all you have to do (actually, my husband does it), because—honestly—it's really all about the gravy.

Succotash

Frozen corn, 1 big bag

Frozen lima beans, 1 big bag

Butter

Parsley, salt, and pepper

Bring 1 cup of salted water to a boil in a large pot. Put in a big bag (each) of frozen corn and baby lima beans. Bring to a boil again and cover. Turn the heat down and let cook about 10 minutes. Drain. Add ¼ stick of butter, ½ cup of chopped parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. Stir it up. Word of warning here: don't use canned vegetables for this (or for anything else, in my opinion). I used canned lima beans this year because I couldn't find frozen. And I promise you, they're vile.

Gravy

Flour

Butter

Turkey bastings

Canned chicken broth (maybe)

Salt and pepper

Melt 1 stick of butter in a saucepan. Add 8 Tbsp. of flour, and cook and stir (with a whisk, if you have one) over very low heat until smooth. *Gradually*, a little bit at a time, add 4 cups of turkey juice (reserved from basting, or a mix of turkey juice and canned chicken broth to make 4 cups) to the flour mix, cooking and stirring constantly. Bring to a boil, and then turn down to a simmer. Cook a few more minutes and keep stirring. Salt and pepper to taste. If your family and guests are gravy hogs, either double the recipe or have some packages of instant gravy on hand. They won't care.

Sweet Potatoes

You put these together last night, so just stick them in the oven with everything else for about 45 minutes. Until the potatoes are soft. Then uncover the pan and pour some marshmallows over the sweet potatoes and put them back into the oven until the marshmallows are puffy and a little brown. Like 5 to 10 minutes. Check on them frequently after 5 minutes, because burnt marshmallows suck.

Whipped Cream

Whipping cream, 3 half pints

Vanilla

Powdered sugar

Do this after dinner. Or, better yet, have somebody else do it while you're making the doggy bags and clearing the table for pies. Pour three half pints of heavy whipping cream into a big bowl. Whip with an electric beater on a low/medium speed. (It will spritz, and there's nothing you can do to stop it, so wear an apron.) When the cream can stand up by itself, fold in 1 tsp. of vanilla and 2 Tbsp. of powdered sugar with a rubber scraper. Try not to eat it right out of the bowl.

I would be remiss in my duties as a Sicilian American kitchen *capo di tutti capi* if I didn't tell you what to do after dinner is over, which is usually signaled by your male diners turning on the second half of a football game.

Designate any food still on the table as "doggy bag" or "leftovers," and package accordingly. Stick it all back in the fridge. Rinse and stack the dishes and leave them on the side of the sink. But first,

take a clean, tall-size plastic garbage bag, put the turkey in it (roasting pan and all), secure tightly, and stick it in the bottom of the fridge. Remove any drawers or shelves that get in your way.

After all, it's your holiday too. And that bird isn't going anywhere.

Now, relax and have some pie and coffee. After the game, of course.

Food Coma

Turkey Tetrazzini

Once you recover from your Thanksgiving food coma, it's time to get creative with the leftovers.

I'll begin by defining for you what Italians mean by a "heavy fork."

A heavy fork is a person who likes to eat a lot of food. I'm not talking about every day, all the time. I'm talking about sitting down hungry, like for Sunday dinner. A heavy fork doesn't do well in one of those restaurants where they charge you an arm and a leg for a steak the size of your palm with a curly leaf on top and some stuff squiggled underneath. Heavy forks enjoy old-style restaurants where they fill your plate. Bonus points if the menu is written on a chalkboard and/or they don't accept credit cards.

So, a heavy fork is not necessarily a fat person. Many are quite thin. They can exist for *weeks* on salads and sardines and buttered toast. Maybe a little *zuppa*. Anthony is one of these people. Some people think that I am, too, but they don't know the size of my hips because I'm really good at hiding them.

I'm saying all this because today I'm doing something spectacular with some of the leftover Thanksgiving turkey: turkey tetrazzini. And to understand the recipe, you also need to understand the following:

1. We are heavy forks.
2. Turkey tetrazzini tastes very, very good.
3. When something tastes good, we want to eat lots of it.

This recipe is loosely based on one from the *Joy of Cooking*. Sort of. The problem with recipes from the *Joy of Cooking* is that the authors are neither Italian nor (apparently) heavy forks. Their recipes are generally for four to six Puritans, which will maybe satisfy two Italians. Maybe. So, most of the time, I have to adapt.

Turkey tetrazzini is the best thing you can do with your leftover turkey because it's made with a lot of cream sauce and that's perfect with dried-out white meat. This is an easy recipe, but not quick, so allow yourself some time. Take the opportunity to finish off any

wine still around from the holiday.

Turkey Tetrazzini

Olive oil

Butter

Sliced fresh mushrooms

Pasta

More butter

Flour

Chicken broth, 2 cans

Cream (or half and half), 2 cups

Salt and pepper

Leftover turkey

Grated cheese

1. Wash and slice a big package of mushrooms. I wash my mushrooms. Some people don't. If you don't wash your mushrooms, please don't tell me about it (like, seriously, mushrooms are dirty). Fry the mushrooms in olive oil and a little butter.
2. Cook 1 pound of pasta. I like little pasta for the tetrazzini because then you can serve it with a big spoon and it doesn't slide all over the place, but a lot of people use angel hair. Today I used mini-farfalle (little butterflies). Just as cute as it sounds.
3. While you're waiting for the pasta water to boil, make the sauce. It takes a little time, sorry. Start on the wine.
4. To make the sauce, melt 1 stick of butter in a deep pot. Add 8 Tbsp. of flour. Cook and stir, over medium heat, until smooth and bubbling. Gradually add 4 cups of chicken broth (canned is fine, or bouillon), stirring constantly and bringing to a boil each time you add some. It will start to get thick. Salt and pepper to taste. If you notice this is basically the same way you make gravy.
5. Add 2 cups of cream or half-and-half to the sauce. Bring to a simmer.
6. Drain the pasta, and add the mushrooms to it. Cut up some leftover turkey into small pieces and add it to the pasta and mushrooms. Pour the cream sauce over everything and mix well.

7. Now, pour the whole thing into a big greased baking pan. Sprinkle with parmesan or Romano cheese, or whatever you got. Bake in a 375°F oven until the cheese starts to brown.

And don't worry about the calories. Come February, if you do the Lent thing (recommended), they'll just disappear.

Natale

Christmas, Part 1—Spirit of the Season

Here, before God and St. Anthony, I confess: Christmas can be a challenge.

I know. Christmas should be all about color and light and music and bells, right? Beautiful Christmas trees, shiny stars, glittery clothes, and parties with family and friends. Carols, candles, cookies, and eggnog. Mistletoe and holly, a baby in a manger, midnight Mass, and children's choirs. Charles Dickens and Christmas miracles.

Peace on Earth, good will toward all.

And presents! ("Nino, hand me that gift over there. Not the big box that looks like it's probably a frying pan—the little one that looks like it came from a jewelry store. Thank you. And I'll have another cranberry gimlet, please.")

At least, that's the Christmas it looks like everyone *else* is doing. But when *I* try, it somehow gets lost in translation. What with the Chicago weather—and the shopping and cleaning and decorating and wrapping and cooking and baking, and trying to find time to take a shower, make the beds, feed the cats, call the family, do a good deed or two, and get a haircut that'll survive the hood on my parka—it's easy to feel a little overwhelmed. And glittery clothes? Forget about it. Glittery clothes make me look like an escapee from *The Great Muppet Caper*, and odds are I'll end up spilling spaghetti sauce on them anyway.

But I get it. Once Christmas is over—and that means once baby Jesus goes back in the box the day after New Year—it's already January. And this is important. Because in January the days start getting longer, which helps you to stop thinking about pouring a bowl of ravioli over somebody's head. That's the whole point. Christmas makes the dark nights brighter and the winter shorter. And you're too busy to browse for flights to Tasmania.

So, it's all worth it. Even if it doesn't look like the highlight reel from *Christmas in Connecticut*.

My father-in-law once told us a story about Christmas back in "the old neighborhood" when he was a child. His mother was a widow. They were poor. He got five pennies and an orange in his Christmas

stocking.

Which made him very, *very* happy. The orange was a treat. And back in the day, five pennies could buy a *lot* of candy at the neighborhood candy store, which was probably a front for a money-laundering operation.

Every Christmas now, I put five pennies and an orange in my children's stockings to remember the spirit of the season. And to remind myself to calm the fuck down, appreciate how lucky I am, and be happy. Even with spaghetti sauce on my skirt.

Christmas, Part 2—The Menu

One part of Christmas that's simple: The Menu.

What menu, are you kidding? For Christmas, there's only one thing on the menu: lasagna.

What else could there be? Are you going to break with 500 years of tradition? Are you going to risk the *leverage* that the Christmas lasagna gives you over your famiglia for the rest of the year? Lasagna is the main reason Italian families are matriarchies.

Now, of course, you're going to have a little something more than lasagna. But try not to serve anything that requires cooking. You've got *presents* to open!

So, here's the Staccato Family Christmas Day Menu:

Christmas Day Menu

Lasagna

Salad

Bread

Cheese

Cookies

Oranges

Spumoni

Eggnog

Coffee

Wine

Sambuca, Galliano, whiskey, etc.

Since *you* make the lasagna, have your husband (or kids or guests or Trader Joe's) do the salad and slice up the cheese. Who cares? Get the bread and the cookies from a good Italian bakery.

And here's the beauty of this menu: You're going to make the sauce for the lasagna up ahead of time, so you can use the meat from the sauce as the centerpiece for Christmas Eve dinner. Personally, I would be happy with a little linguine with clams on Christmas Eve, but I served the meat one year, and now that's all anybody wants. It's my own fault. However, I've come to realize that it's better to do the meat thing on Christmas Eve because, that way, all the work I do for the lasagna serves two purposes. A departure from the traditional (which involves seven to thirteen fishes, in case you were wondering), but hey, this is America.

Everything can be made in advance. Lasagna freezes beautifully. In fact, it may taste even better *after* it's been frozen. Unfortunately, it takes up a lot of space. My grandmother had a six-foot-high freezer in the basement. Full of lasagna. That's a *lot* of leverage. I don't have a freezer in the basement, which means my Christmas seasons are a life-or-death struggle between the space in my refrigerator and how much food I want to make before Christmas Eve. I need to fix that. Because a freezer in the basement is a symbol of an Italian woman's power.

Power I don't have.

Yet.

Christmas, Part 3—The Shopping List

This is the shopping list for Tomato Meat Sauce, for the lasagna, and for a few other things we like to have around at Christmas. Unlike the shopping lists for Easter and Thanksgiving, this one is full-on Italian. If you have an Italian grocery store within range, it would be a good time to go make their acquaintance. The store should have a butcher counter and a deli and a bakery. And just enough stuff for the *medigans* * to make it a one-stop shopping destination.

Christmas Shopping List

For the sauce :

- Italian plum tomatoes, 6 big (28 oz.) cans
- Olive oil
- Chuck roast, 2 lb.
- Pork shoulder, 2 lb.
- Bay leaves
- Onions, 2 large
- Tomato paste, 3 small (6 oz.) cans

For the lasagna :

- Lasagna noodles, 2 pkgs.
- Ricotta, 5 lb. (Ask the guy at the deli to do a 2 lb. container and a 3 lb. container. Trust me.)
- Eggs
- Parsley, Italian flat leaf
- Ground meat (I use sirloin), 2½ lb.
- More olive oil (stock up)
- Mozzarella, shredded, 4 lb.
- Parmesan, grated
- 2 giant lasagna pans (and I mean *giant*)

For the honey nut cookies :

- Flour
- Honey
- Vanilla

- Chopped pecans (pecan pieces if you can find them, they're smaller)
- Confectioner's (powdered) sugar

Everything else :

- Olive salad, from the deli
- Italian bread
- Provolone, a small wheel
- Panettone (Christmas breakfast)
- Cookies (I recommend *cuccidati* and maybe something with lemon in it)
- Oranges (the little ones are fun)
- Pistachios
- Chocolate (in whatever form you like to eat it)
- Spumoni
- Coffee
- Half and half
- Eggnog
- Wine
- Sambuca, Galliano, whiskey, etc.

You can feed off of this food for the next several weeks of winter, *if* you have the freezer space (I continue to make my case). So buy lots of anything and everything you like. My rule of thumb on impulse grocery shopping is if you spontaneously start salivating while you're looking at something, buy it. Your body is sending you a message.

* The American Italian word for "Americans." Say it fast three times and you'll get it.

Christmas, Part 4—The Sauce

Tomato Meat Sauce

I make this sauce once a year because it has pork in it, and I don't usually eat pork because pigs are nice animals. Actually, *all* animals are nice, and I promise that someday I'm going to stop eating them. Probably when people stop asking me to cook them.

Timing is important here:

1. Four days before Christmas: Clean your house.
2. Three days before Christmas: Make Tomato Meat Sauce.
3. Two days before Christmas: Make the lasagna.
4. Christmas Eve: Dress up, do your nails, put on some Christmas carols, make coffee, set out cookies.
5. When it's time for dinner, heat up some sauce on the stove and put the meat from the sauce in the oven. Make some pasta. Tell your husband to do everything else. Have a glass of wine. Eat. Open presents. Go to midnight Mass, if you want an adventure.

In a perfect world, I would make this sauce *weeks* in advance and freeze it. Last year (are you listening, Anthony?) circumstances, and my lack of freezer space, forced me to make the sauce *and* the lasagna on Christmas Eve. It almost killed me. Listen up, Italian girls: The next time some *jamo*ke tells you he loves you and promises you the moon, look deep into his eyes and say in a husky voice, "I want a freezer. Size matters."

It's not that tomato meat sauce is hard to make. It's not. It's just that it takes a long time. It's the sauce for making the lasagna *and* the required extra sauce on the side *and* the sauce for Christmas Eve dinner.

The recipe is based on one from *The Italian Cookbook* by the Chicago Culinary Arts Institute. Even though it's out of print, you can sometimes get it on Amazon. If you can't find it on Amazon, contact me and I'll xerox it for you. Really. That's how much I want you to eat good food.

Tomato Meat Sauce

Italian tomatoes, 6 big cans

Onions, 2 large
Olive oil
Chuck roast, 2 lb.
Pork shoulder, 2 lb.
Bay leaves
Salt
Tomato paste, 3 little cans

1. Put 6 cans of Italian tomatoes into a blender, 1 can at a time.
2. Pour the pureed tomatoes into a *really big* pot.
3. Brown 2 large chopped onions in olive oil and add them to the pot.
4. Brown a chuck roast and then a pork shoulder in a deep skillet (you could do this in the oven instead, I suppose).
5. Put the pieces of browned meat into the pot with the tomatoes and onions. Make sure they're submerged. If they're not, you can cut them in half.
6. Add a few bay leaves and 2 Tbsp. of salt.
7. Bring to a simmer, turn down the heat, and cover the pot. Let the sauce simmer over a low flame for at least a couple of hours and stir it once in a while.
8. Take the cover off the pot. Add 3 small cans of tomato paste. You can add some water if the sauce gets too thick.
9. Simmer the sauce *un* covered over *very* low heat for another couple of hours. Stir it every time you walk by so it doesn't scorch on the bottom.
10. The sauce is done when the meat is just starting to fall apart.

Take the meat out of the sauce and put it in the fridge for Christmas Eve dinner. Take the bay leaves out of the sauce, if you can find them. Ladle the sauce into three containers: one for making the lasagna, one for the "extra" with the lasagna, and one to serve the over the pasta of your choice on Christmas Eve. Put the three containers of sauce in the fridge to await their destinies.

My pasta of choice for Christmas Eve is usually leftover noodles from making the lasagna, shredded up. Have some fresh ricotta and some grated cheese on the side for toppings. Serve the meat on a

platter and make sure you put it in the middle of the table because it's impressive.

Remember, if you're smart, you're going to make your Christmas lasagna (recipe to follow) *before* Christmas Eve. I can't emphasize this enough. And *do not* forget to set aside the extra sauce. You *gotta* have extra sauce with the lasagna, because sauce junkies exist in every Italian family, and they will never let you forget the *one time* you didn't have it.

And so, by Christmas Eve dinnertime, when the lasagna is resting comfortably in the fridge, and the meat and the sauce are heating up, your job is *done* for the holidays because the kids are gonna eat store-bought panettone for breakfast and like it.

You can then pour yourself a glass of red. And wait for Santa to drop a freezer down your chimney.

Christmas, Part 5—The Baked Spaghetti

Lasagna

Before Prozac, there was lasagna.

Lasagna (*n.*): Italian turkey. The baked spaghetti.

I never heard the word lasagna come out of my grandmother's mouth. It was always "the baked spaghetti." And, yes, it was the main attraction on holidays, always *with* —never instead of — turkey and/or ham. We had it on the Fourth of July, too, if I remember correctly. And my grandmother's freezer was always full of baby lasagnas, made with any leftovers from the main event.

Before I begin, let me give you a word of warning: This lasagna, for all its amazing qualities, will be a little watery/oily when you take it out of the oven. I hear it's a common problem. I read somewhere that the water hides in the noodles. I have also read that this can be remedied by either using "no-cook" lasagna noodles, or letting your cooked noodles dry out before you use them.

The first remedy is an infamia, and I won't even discuss it. As for the second remedy, I promise that if you let your noodles dry out they will be impossibly sticky. Myself, I suck the excess liquid out with a turkey baster. It works.

The transformation of a zillion ingredients into a ten-pound tray of organized layers is, to put it mildly, a big deal. The way to wrap your mind around it is to break it down to components. This is the way to deal with any overwhelming situation in life, not just lasagna. In fact, if we want to get philosophical about it, we can call it "The Zen of Lasagna," which could be the title of my next book.

Here are the components of lasagna:

1. Sauce
2. Lasagna noodles
3. Ricotta (mixed with eggs, parsley, grated cheese, salt, and pepper)
4. Ground meat (with parsley, salt, and pepper)
5. Mozzarella cheese

6. Parmesan cheese

Now, we'll go through each of them, one by one.

The Sauce

Use your Christmas Tomato Meat Sauce, the recipe for which is in the previous chapter. If you've been paying attention, you've already made this, so it's ready to go. Just have it handy. Even if you're making lasagna for some occasion other than Christmas, I do *not* recommend same-day sauce. You'll be up until two in the morning.

Lasagna Noodles

Follow the package directions, but cook the noodles only until you can poke a fork through them. Drain the noodles, and put them back in the pot with some water so they don't stick together. You'll need 20 to 25 noodles for the whole lasagna but make extra because you never know. Sometimes they tear. Not that it matters, but still.

Ricotta

Buy 5 pounds of ricotta from a deli counter. Do *not* buy the prepackaged stuff. I don't know what that is, but it's not ricotta. Buy a 2 lb. container and a 3 lb. container. Put the 2 lb. container in the fridge to serve as a side dish on Christmas Eve. Take the 3 lb. container and pour off any excess water. Put it into a big bowl with 2 eggs, ½ cup of parmesan cheese, ½ cup chopped fresh parsley, 1 tsp. of salt, and 1 tsp. of pepper. Beat with an electric beater until it's smooth and then put it in the fridge until show time.

Ground Meat

I use 2½ pounds of ground sirloin. Other people use a meatloaf mix of ground beef, pork, and veal. I like sirloin. Brown it really good with some salt, pepper, and parsley. Drain it on a plate lined with paper towels. Do this step last, because you don't want meat sitting out for too long.

Mozzarella Cheese

Buy 4 pounds of packaged shredded mozzarella. Who's gonna know? You probably won't use all of it. But you *might* .

Parmesan Cheese

I always buy a big container of fresh grated parmesan, also from the deli counter. Because there's no greater pain in the ass than grating cheese.

Get all that stuff ready, and you're in the home stretch.

Preheat your oven to 350°F.

Use a giant, *deep* aluminum lasagna pan. In fact, use two, one nested inside the other. If you've been watching the weight of the ingredients, you'll agree that this is a good idea. Get the giant size lasagna pans, because anything smaller won't be deep enough.

Now we layer:

1. Spread some sauce (about 1 cup) on the bottom of the pan, so the lasagna won't stick.
2. Layer enough noodles on top of the sauce to cover the pan. They should overlap a little. Depending on the size and shape of your pan, you may have to tear up a few noodles to cover it all. Like a patchwork quilt. It won't matter.
3. Sprinkle the noodles with some shredded mozzarella. ("Mom, how much?"... "However much you like, Nicki. Just don't use all of it, because there's more layers coming.")
4. Top the mozzarella with half of the ground beef.
5. Top the beef with half of the ricotta, the best you can. This is tricky because the meat will stick to the ricotta, so use a *very* light touch.
6. Cover the ricotta with a thin layer of sauce.
7. Noodles
8. Mozzarella
9. The other half of the beef
10. The other half of the ricotta
11. Sauce
12. Noodles
13. Sauce
14. Mozzarella
15. Sprinkle with parmesan.

Bake about 45 minutes to an hour, or until the whole thing is bubbling and the cheese on top starts to get a little puffy and golden. Don't let the noodles get too dry.

Take the lasagna out of the oven and let it sit for about 20 minutes. When the pan is cool enough to touch, tip it (carefully!) to

see if there's any excess liquid to get rid of. I recommend using the turkey baster to suck out the liquid because this bitch is *heavy* .

Let the lasagna cool off a bit more, wrap it in foil, and put it in the fridge or freezer for future consumption. To serve, reheat and have extra sauce on the side.

You have now harnessed the power of lasagna. Use it wisely. Random, and perhaps unscrupulous, men will want to marry you. You will begin receiving an unusual number of invitations to potluck dinners. Your children will never want to leave you.

Personally, I'd use that power to go have a glass of wine and take a nap. In fact, I think I'll go do that right now.

Christmas, Part 6—The Cookie

Honey Nut Cookies

The cookie. The. Cookie. One cookie. *Uno* . Singular.

I used to make a lot of cookies. A *lot* of cookies, all different kinds. I did it because my children loved it, or maybe I was just imagining that. Maybe I was looking to give them some memories that didn't involve me yelling at them for not doing their homework.

Then, one day, I got The Message. It came to me suddenly while I was meditating on the cruel fate that gave us Thanksgiving and Christmas only a month apart from each other. It was the voice of the Blessed Mother, speaking deep in my heart. "My child," she said, "that's why God gave us Italian bakeries."

She's right. Think about it. As happy as you were when Mom baked cookies, you went totally *bonkers* when she walked through the door with a box from the bakery.

I will cite two examples that carry the Mother of God's point:

1. Nicki was little, and I was heavily pregnant with her brother. I had my husband's entire extended family over for Christmas dinner. After dinner, I brought out the coffee and the Galliano and my ***absolutely perfectly gorgeous*** platter of homemade Christmas cookies. My father-in-law took *one* look at it and said, "I *loathe* cookies." Really? Really? In the dictionary of my mind, next to the word "buzzkill" will forever reside a picture of my father-in-law at that moment. He's in heaven now. The part where there aren't any cookies.
2. My children have become adults. A couple of years ago, I went to a bakery and brought home some *cuccidati*, which are ground zero of Sicilian Christmas cookies. My son ate one and said, "Mom. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but these are pretty close to yours." And all those wasted years—all that time and money I could have spent on shoes—flashed in front of my eyes. I must have had a look on my face because he said, real fast, "I think your filling is a little better!" Nice save, Nino. I was *so* glad to see the look on *your* face when you discovered that the *cuccidati* from

the bakery this year had chocolate chips in them.

Not being entirely stupid, I currently have my baking down to this one cookie. The rest can come from the bakery. But this is one hell of a good cookie. Trust me. Everybody (i.e., my husband Anthony and my cousin Vita) says it's the only cookie they care about. And I've never had one from a bakery that even came close.

The recipe is another one from my husband's Aunt Geraldine.

Honey Nut Cookies

Butter

Honey

Vanilla

Flour

Salt (don't forget or you'll be sorry)

Chopped pecans

Powdered sugar

1. Set out 2 sticks of butter to get soft in a big bowl.
2. Once they're soft, beat in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of honey and $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. of vanilla.
3. In another big bowl, stir together $\frac{1}{8}$ tsp. of salt and 2 cups of flour (sift, if you've got that gene).
4. Beat the flour into the butter mixture, a little at a time. Then, with a wooden spoon, blend in $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of chopped pecans (this is the only part of the recipe that's painful). I like my pecans chopped very small, so I usually put them in a plastic bag before adding them to the dough and break them up a little with a hammer. It's great fun.
5. Put the dough in the fridge for half an hour so it's easier to handle.
6. Preheat your oven to 325°F.
7. Pinch off pieces of dough about the size of a half dollar, roll them into balls, and put them on a baking sheet.
8. Shape the balls into crescents. They won't spread much in the oven, so you can get around 20 of them on the sheet.
9. Bake about 20 minutes, or until golden brown. After 15 minutes, watch carefully because they can get too brown in a hurry.

Take the cookies out of the oven and let them cool *just a little bit* , until you can slide them off the baking sheet with a spatula without breaking them (if they break too easy, put them back in the oven for a minute or two). *Carefully* put the cookies on a plate and sift powdered sugar on them. Use a little strainer and a spoon for this. The more powdered sugar, the better. You *have to* do this while the cookies are still warm.

I make one exception to my cookie austerity program. I will always, happily, host or attend a cookie-baking party. Done right, a cookie-baking party will include Christmas carols and lots of wine. And of course, you'll decorate the house before the company comes over. You can give them presents, too. That covers a lot of bases, plus you get your cookies done.

Just make sure you invite one adult who doesn't drink. *Somebody* needs to watch the oven.

Or drive to the bakery.

A Very Merry Connie Staccato Christmas

Bonus Recipe — Cuccidati

It's Christmastime, and the thoughts of Sicilian American women turn to one thing: cuccidati

For the benefit of you "out" people, this is pronounced koo-che-DAH-dee. Also referred to as Sicilian fig cookies, Sicilian Christmas cookies, Italian fig cookies, or simply the figs as in, "You gonna make the figs this year?"

Cuccidati is an ancient recipe, judging by the ingredients, all of which are pre-Columbian, except for the sugar in the dough, a modern upgrade. There are certain people who think that everything has to be chocolate (definitely a New World thing) and add chocolate chips to the filling. If you do this, stop it. It's an infamia. And your children will never know a true cuccidati.

In my family, every Christmas season we baked the cuccidati at my grandmother's house. When I say "we," I mean every last female of the famiglia and the male children under the age of twelve. My grandfather would hide.

The non-Sicilian daughters-in-law were expected to participate but were monitored. Adult males were not invited to this gathering, even if they wanted to be, which they did not. In fact, most of them resented the invasion because it took over the kitchen, the main room of a Sicilian household. I once even heard my grandfather snarl, "Big deal. Buy some Fig Newtons and put some frosting on them." This sentiment was greeted by the mal occhio from my grandmother, but otherwise ignored. Take into consideration that my grandfather didn't like ricotta in his lasagna, and that making cuccidati is a huge project spread out over two to three days, and that's sort of an explanation.

I'm going to share the family recipe with you. Yes, it's long, and yes, it will probably take you three days, unless you have absolutely nothing else to do and that includes brushing your teeth. And yes, at the present time I am more inclined just to buy my cuccidati from a bakery. But learn how to make cuccidati, and you can have your pick of handsome Sicilian men to marry. Check their work history first.

Call your daughters and your sisters and your cousins. Call your sons and brothers, too, if they watch *Great British Bake Off*. Leave plenty of time to argue about who's got the right recipe.

Part I: The Dough

3 lb. of cake flour (13½ cups. I looked it up.)

6 tsp. of baking powder (yes, 6)

1½ cups of sugar

1 tsp. of salt (*Never* leave this out. *Never*. I did. Once. I will do time in purgatory for it.)

3 sticks of cold butter

1 cup of cold Crisco (you can buy it in premeasured sticks now, lucky us), or lard

2 cups of milk

1. Sift together (or stir together—I'm not the kind of girl who sifts) the flour, baking powder, sugar, and salt, in the biggest bowl you have.
2. With a pastry cutter, cut in the butter and Crisco until crumbly.
3. Gradually add enough of the milk to make a medium-soft dough.
4. Knead the dough until smooth, about 10 minutes.
5. Place the dough in a covered container and put it in the fridge for at least an hour. Overnight is better.
6. Bring the dough to room temperature when you're ready to use it.

Part II: The Filling

½ lb. of dates

1½ lb. of dried figs, as soft as you can find them, hard tips trimmed

1 cup of blanched, slivered almonds

¼ cup of chopped citron

⅓ cup of raisins

1 small jar of orange marmalade (or a cut-up orange, peel and all, scrub it first)

3 Tbsp. honey

1 tsp. of ground cinnamon

A little whiskey (The good stuff. And just a splash, because you get to drink the rest. My grandmother liked Manhattans.)

1. Toast your almonds in a 300°F oven until they're golden and you can smell them. Roughly chop the dates and figs. Mix all the ingredients together in a big bowl, the best you can.
2. Take this mixture and put it through a food grinder, using a coarse blade. (A few words about food grinders: I'm talking about the kind my grandmother used that looks like something that would make Dick Cheney's eyes light up. They are easy to find in thrift stores, and probably will be until they become a yuppie kitchen boutique discovery and they start selling them for the equivalent of a down payment on a car.)
3. Gather the filling into a ball, wrap in plastic wrap, and put it in the fridge. It will keep for at least a week. Probably longer. I am of the opinion that you could put this stuff in a time capsule and bury it somewhere in Boston's North End and 300 years from now somebody could dig it up and make cuccidati.

Part III: Baking

1. Preheat your oven to 375°F.
2. Break off a ball of dough the size of an orange and roll it thin. Cut into rectangles about the size of an index card.
3. Put 1 tsp. (more or less) of filling and shape it like a Tootsie Roll on top of each rectangle.
4. Roll up the filling in the dough and pinch the ends shut.
5. Make 2 to 3 little slashes on one side of the cookie and shape it into a "C," slashed side out.
6. Bake on an ungreased (thank God!) cookie sheet for 17 to 20 minutes, or until cookies are very lightly browned.
7. Let cool.

Part IV: Icing

1 box of powdered sugar
6 Tbsp. of warm milk
2 tsp. of vanilla extract
2 tsp. of lemon extract
Sprinkles, colorful ones. *Lots* of them.

1. Mix all the ingredients in a bowl. Add a little more milk if the icing is too thick.
2. Spoon icing on each cookie and shake some sprinkles on top. Fast, while the icing is still moist. This is one of the times of life when small children come in handy. They know sprinkles.
3. Do ten or so cookies at a time. You may need more than one batch of icing.

That's it. Trust me, it's easier than it sounds. The Manhattans help. If you have extra dough, just roll it up and bake it without the filling. Which your man will probably like better than the figs.

And, by the way, *nobody* sings "Ave Maria" like Perry Como.

Buon natale !

Peace, love, and *abbondanza* ,
Connie Staccato

About Connie Staccato

Full disclosure, Connie Staccato lifted her name from the vastly underrated 1960s TV show *Johnny Staccato* starring John Cassavetes as a jazz musician and private detective. If you've never seen the show, you can find episodes on YouTube. Be prepared for a good time, especially if you live in a state with legal weed.

Some of the other names herein have also been changed to protect the innocent, the easily embarrassed, and people with Mafia connections who would prefer to keep that quiet.

Otherwise, this is (mostly) *not* a work of fiction. Not even the parts about Connie's husband being a vacation pod for extraterrestrials. It's hard to prove something like that, so you'll just have to take her word for it.

Connie Staccato lives in a somewhat lackluster suburb of Chicago with her husband Anthony, two of the most beautiful cats God ever created, and an assortment of alien tourists. Her children still visit her voluntarily.